Pur'p'l Tur'tlz

TOO HARD TO HANDLE

Music and Mischief in the San Fernando Valley: The '80s & '90s

A Memoir

GREG BROWN

Foreword by Evan Marcus Rotman

TOO HARD TO HANDLE

A Memoir of the Pur'p'l Tur't'lz

By Greg Brown

with Steve Bryant · Kenny Bellew · Greg Herman · Chris Baustert · Todd Myers · Ron Russell

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

FRONT MATTER

Dedication
Foreword — Evan Marcus Rotman
Author's Note
Introduction
Online Shells & Archive

PART I — OVERTURE: PRE–PUR'P'L TUR'T'LZ

Prologue: Early Co-Conspirators — Steve Brown, Dan, Jim & Gary
Chapter 1: The Valley in the '80s
Chapter 2: Roots, Rockets & Rookie Chaos
Chapter 3: First Fans, Found Family, and the Grind
Chapter 4: Girls, Couches & 4 A.M. Conversations

PART II — THE MUSIC

Chapter 5: Backyards, Beginnings & Breakthroughs
Chapter 5A: Hansen Dam — Our Own Little Dead Show
Artifact Interlude (1990): The Brent Letter
Chapter 6: The Name Game Evolves
Chapter 7: The Band Stops Being a Theory
Chapter 8: Opening for Go Ahead
Field Note A: Larry Saltman — "Pur'p'l Tur't'lz Open for Go Ahead"
Chapter 9: Camp Templin — Where the Shell Got Hard
Field Note B: The Gold Claim — Moths in the Beer
Chapter 10: The Lot Shows — Taking the Turtle for a Walk
Interlude I-A: Ventura — The Lot Shows (Parking-Lot Church)
Interlude I-B: Irvine — The Lot Shows (The Scene Expands)
Chapter 11: First Club Nights — The Palomino Door

Chapter 12: The Palomino and Rick Rubin
Chapter 12A: The Second Time We Shared a Bill With Bob Weir & Kingfish

INTERLUDE SUITE — THE PALOMINO / KINKO'S ORBIT
Interlude II: The FM Architect — From UCLA to the "Bo" Library
Interlude III: Calling Roger Dean
Interlude IV: Meeting The Turtles (Kinko's → The Palomino)
Interlude V: Phil Garris, the Blues for Allah Button, and a Kinko's Color Pass
Interlude VI: Merl Saunders — The $50 Slot That Felt Like a Million
Interlude VII: A&M — The Day the Idea Hatched (Don Ray Phinney)

PART III — STUDIO DAYS

Chapter 13: Southbound Miles & Magnetic Trails
Chapter 14: The Fans — Hardshells
Chapter 15: Studio Days — Part I: Hatched and the Tape Machine
Field Note: Racer's Garage Press & the Dynacord Disaster
Chapter 16: Outtakes, Epics, and Improv (1989–1991)
Archive Note: KXLU — Live In-Studio with Johnny V (12-20-90)
Interlude VIII: The Haire Pharmerz — Two Mics, One Strap, and Rock Bottom (1989–1990)
Interlude IX: Emmett Chapman, Laurel Canyon, and the Driveway Next Door

PART IV — LEGACY

Chapter 17: The Zappa Detour — B*AR**F***
Chapter 18: The Joint Chiefs — I Came Back
Chapter 19: Leaving the Valley / Moving to Santa Cruz (final title TBD)
Epilogue: Looking Back, Moving Forward
Coda: The Groove Endures

BACK MATTER

Facebook Easter Egg — 2017
Era Map (Steve's Frame)
Anchor Timeline & Recordings (Highlights)
Originals Index (Selected)
Notable Covers (Recurring)
Pur'p'l Tur't'lz Discography
How to Contribute
About the Band Members
Acknowledgments (Expanded)
Publishing Information

DEDICATION

For Steve Bryant and all the Hardshells who rode with us—your spirit, your joy, and your chaos live on in every note.

For Ethel Bryant, who gave us space, grace, and more support than we could ever repay.

And for Ken Bellew, who added the spice.

Foreword

By Evan Marcus Rotman

I'm Evan Marcus Rotman. In the late '80s and early '90s, I was one of the many friends orbiting the Pur'p'l Tur't'lz universe—part fan, part helper, part witness. I wasn't in the band, but I was around for the shows, the house parties, the jams, the flyers, the roadie moments, the afterglow Sundays. I got to watch a local scene become a real community, and a garage band become something bigger than a band: a time and a place you could step into and feel alive.

It was the '80s. The war on (some) drugs was in full swing—but if you were a middle-class white kid, it didn't really touch you. Pot, acid, and coke were readily available to anyone who wanted them. Crack, smack, and speed lurked on the fringes…for the "really bad kids."

If you were in high school or college back then, you probably had friends who were Deadheads. The Grateful Dead's popularity surged in that era, and after years of turning a blind eye to fans taping shows, the band quietly did something that—whether they meant to or not—helped change the music world: they made space for tapers. Tapes were currency. Music wasn't available at a click. Sometimes it took weeks or months of letters and trades with a stranger to score a few highly coveted new recordings.

As those tapes circulated through the college scene and trickled down into high schools across America, the band that everyone loved to hate finally became hip and popular. (Jerry Garcia once said something like, "We're like bad architecture or an old whore—if you stick around long enough, it gets respectable.")

Meanwhile, in a little town called Canoga Park, California (and the surrounding valley towns), a handful of friends started a band and called themselves Pur'p'l Tur't'lz.

It began as five guys and three chords (more chords came later). There was Kenny Bellew on rhythm guitar—skinny, smiling, usually holding a beer. On lead guitar was Greg Herman, with a teddy-bear persona and an insatiable appetite for long jams. Greg Brown handled keyboards—the true music geek of the band, quick with the quip, with hair so electric it looked like it needed batteries. Chris, followed by Todd, and later Ron held down the drums. And on bass was a skinny, beautiful man named Steve Bryant.

Steve had the biggest stage presence of them all. He played an old Fender P-Bass, usually barefoot, long red locks falling past the middle of his back—locks he eventually cut and donated to a wig company for cancer patients. He bounced around like a top when he played, sweat flying from his brow. "I'M PSYCHED!!!" was his catchphrase. He meant it—and it stuck. His energy could light up whatever room (or backyard) they were in. His basslines sweetened the dance floor the way frosting sweetens a cake.

Now that they had a band, they needed a following. They played every backyard, garage, or living room that would have them. They were the quintessential garage band—the kind Frank Zappa's *Joe's Garage* could've been written about.

Taking a page from the Dead's playbook, they rented a flatbed truck and cruised around the valley to the spots where heads were known to gather. Somehow, they pulled the hippies out of the woodwork and built a real following. It

wasn't the Panhandle in San Francisco in 1967… but it was our home-spun, 1980s version of it. It brought out the freaks.

Slowly, the band morphed from a backyard-and-garage band into a club band. An enterprising hippie started a small production company and began promoting shows and weekly club nights. The thing is, the "fans" were mostly our friends—and that meant any of us who weren't in the band might become roadies for a night: schlepping gear, rolling cables, or giving Greg Herman a ride, since he notoriously didn't drive. "Guitar tech" was a loose term; if you could get Herman to the gig, you were his tech (and you got in free).

Greg Brown worked at Kinko's Copies, so there was always a steady flow of flyers, posters, and handmade tickets. A local artist—also a friend and fan—made T-shirts and designed a logo for the band.

They still played some Grateful Dead covers, but more and more originals started showing up in the set. Word on the street was they were even working on a full album of original songs.

The popularity of Pur'p'l Tur't'lz soared. There were plenty of Dead-sounding cover bands in the valley, but the Turt'lz reigned supreme. They wrote songs with hooks—songs like "Spice," "Peace Of Mind," and "Two Magic Hands"—keeping the beats funky and the vibe alive. They chose their covers well, too: "I'm a Man" (Spencer Davis Group), "Sympathy for the Devil" (The Rolling Stones). And Steve's rendition of "Hard to Handle" was always a crowd-pleaser.

As the crowds grew, club gigs started attracting more mainstream fans, while the house parties became hush-hush.

You had to know someone to get invited, or the sheer size of the crowd would blow the whole thing up.

Sundays often landed at a house called The Farm, where we'd BBQ, jam, and relive the weekend's stories. Toward the end of the day, we'd gather for the best 90 minutes on TV: *The Simpsons*, *In Living Color*, and *Married… with Children*. Then we'd crawl home and brace for the week.

It began to feel like a big family—seeing the same faces, week after week—and it was a great vibe. As the '80s came to a close, each band member's persona got clearer, and the band just kept getting better. We followed them all over the SFV, and even as far as Santa Barbara. I seem to remember a gig or two up in Berkeley.

Kenny Bellew had a job driving a box truck delivering Pepperidge Farm cookies—so that truck became the band's gear rig, and there was never a shortage of cookies at the shows.

As their connections widened, they got asked to open for offshoot bands connected to members of the Grateful Dead and Santana—opening for Bill Kreutzmann, Brent Mydland, and even Bob Weir. It felt like the pinnacle of that era. Things were looking up…until they weren't.

When the '80s turned into the '90s, the scene began to change. Pot, beer, and acid gave way to whiskey, coke, and meth. The drugs that once brought us together started dividing us—trippers and dancers on one side, tweakers and drunks on the other. Some people handled it. Some didn't.

And as the web tightened, the parties that used to end on Sunday night by 9:30 started stretching into Monday or Tuesday. For some, they never really ended.

The band had hit a peak: the music was solid, the fan base was growing, venues mostly took kindly to the scene, and it felt like the next "big step" was right there.

After months of production, money spent, substances consumed, and the classic tale of a manager embezzling what little money there was, the album *Hatched* came out. I can't tell you how many copies sold, but I can tell you the end came not long after its release.

Spin-off bands appeared. Greg and Steve—maybe the two most serious musicians in the group—formed an acoustic duo in the Hot Tuna vein called The Hair Pharmerz (and between the two of them there was enough hair to wig out a cancer ward). Greg later formed a Zappa cover band called B.A.R.F. (Bunch 'A Rude Fuckers). Steve played in a metal/funk band called Edicus and worked the Hollywood club scene.

Some people moved away. Some went deep into white powders. Greg Brown—the de facto leader, maybe mostly because Kinko's made him the band's publicity engine—moved to Santa Cruz to study music. And the band, and the scene, came to an abrupt end.

I ended up tangled in my own legal snares, so I missed what was later considered "the end" of it all.

But none of us who were there will ever forget the magic that was made in our little nook of the SFV in the late '80s. For a brief moment, nobody cared how you voted, what you ate, who you slept with, or what you did for work. It was a magical, innocent era—the kind of youthful exuberance that comes with the sex-drugs-rock-and-roll lifestyle that, if you're lucky, finds you in your late teens or early twenties

before life gets too serious. If you're unlucky, one of the three takes over, and you either die, get locked up, or end up sleeping in a park.

I'm grateful to be one of the ones who made it to the other side. I'll hold the memories of those years dearly, all the way to the grave. They made me the man I am today.

And now Greg Brown tells the story from the inside—the music, the mayhem, the brotherhood, the rooms and backyards and parking lots where it all happened. What follows is a time capsule, a love letter, and a reckoning. If you were there, you'll recognize your people. If you weren't, you'll understand why those of us who were will never forget it.

—EMR

AUTHOR'S NOTE

After Steve's first major hospital stay, I visited and found him clear-eyed and on a mission: get the tapes—every hissy bedroom jam, every club board, every park-generator set—digitized and out in the world. He'd always insisted we record, even when the music or the machine wasn't ready. The best shows, of course, slipped through our fingers—that's live music—but so many magical moments (and a few darker ones) survived.

We set up at his place. I showed him how to thread a cassette, snake the deck into his MacBook Pro, arm a track in GarageBand, and upload to my SoundCloud. He was tentative with the laptop at first, then relentless. He burned a CD of every transfer, photographed the old J-cards, and typed memories for each upload—funny, blunt, sometimes heartbreaking.

As he worked, he'd call me and we'd relive the nights together, arguing tempos and laughing at the parts we misremembered. It was exactly what he'd said we'd do when we were old: look back, together.

What follows are Steve's candid notes, paired with the audio —the Pur'p'l Tur't'lz Archive—that underwrites our story. *To me, it's a treasure.*

INTRODUCTION

We weren't polished. We weren't on a label. We weren't the sure thing. In a world that prizes neatness and formula, the Pur'p'l Tur't'lz were the wild card—rough, creative, and a little unruly.

From our first messy jam sessions to late-night guerrilla gigs, we chased a dream bigger than ourselves. The music industry loves some stories and leaves others behind. Ours wasn't about contracts or hits—it was about grit, chaos, and magic. About five misfits who refused to quit.

This is our story as I remember it. I've brought in other voices where I can—fans, friends, bandmates—but memory is slippery. I have no doubt Greg Herman, Chris, or Todd would tell parts differently. Steve and Kenny aren't here to ask. What I do have are old tapes, flyers, and fragments of conversations that still carry their spirit.

So this is part memoir, part band history, part love letter to the nights that almost broke us—and the songs that still keep us alive. It's about the moments when we were too raw, too loud, too hard to handle…and maybe exactly who we were meant to be. "Where memory blurs, the tapes speak."

For Steve, for Kenny, and for all the Hardshells who believed we were worth the ride—their spirit hums on every page.

— Greg Brown
Santa Cruz, California · 2025

ONLINE SHELLS & ARCHIVE

For deeper dives, music, photos, and artifacts:

- The Pur'p'l Tur't'lz Archive (audio)
  https://soundcloud.com/greg-brown-37/sets/purpl-turtlz-archive-a-k-a-the
- Pur'p'l Tur't'lz Family on Facebook
  https://www.facebook.com/groups/137835045410
- Photo Archive
  https://www.facebook.com/groups/137835045410/media/photos
- Video Playlist
  https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLdfla0zpEqdSHHMBT7AUvWx7QM0xAbE_K&si=IBt_c2utpwVD50g8
- Full Book & Media Bundle (Internet Archive)
  https://archive.org/details/too-hard-to-handle-purp-l-turt-lz-memoir-greg-brown
- Merch & Hard Goods
  https://direct.distrokid.com/gregbrown/

PART I — OVERTURE — PRE–PUR'P'L TUR'T'LZ

We learned to be a band in living rooms and side yards, where teenage bravado met cheap tape and somebody's older neighbor who "could play slide." The songs didn't always have names. One of them borrowed a fistful of Dylan lines on the understanding that theft plus love equals collaboration. What we lacked in technique we made up in momentum—two chords and a dare. Years later, Steve would try to explain it in his own way:

"We are not a band we are the purpl turtlz…there is a difference"

At the time, we didn't have a name yet. But the idea was already there.

"It's kind of a song about nothing," Steve wrote later, "but the Turtlz made it rock."

That's how it started: a handful of friends, a few riffs, and a belief that the room would hold.

Chapter 1: The Valley in the ’80s

The San Fernando Valley — summer 1982 — wasn’t the pastel-polo paradise MTV sold to the world. For us it was strip malls, cracked asphalt, and suburban garages that shook with distortion. Ventura Boulevard baked under a ruthless sun by day; by night, the streets ran on neon, car exhaust, cheap beer, and somebody’s older brother’s cassette deck turned up just a little too loud.

You could hear the decade everywhere: Camaros blasting Journey, Van Halen leaking from open garages, radios bouncing off 7-Eleven awnings. But our real religion lived on tape — bootlegs passed hand to hand, album covers stared at like sacred texts. We weren’t chasing Top 40. We were chasing **the feeling**: make it an event, bring your people, share what you’ve got, stretch the night until it feels like a small universe. We were trying to duplicate that, smaller, in a Valley-kid way.

Sanctuary for rejects

Steve Bryant and I didn’t become friends because we were model students. We met at summer band camp, got paired as “catch-up partners” for marching drills, and never actually caught up. By fall we were in Instrumental Instruction for an entire semester — Steve on trombone, me fumbling with French horn — technically learning music, mostly learning how to disappear.

There was a way to climb up into the ceiling where the lights were, vanish into the shadows, and sneak off. Sometimes we just goofed off. Sometimes we smoked weed like we were auditioning for the world’s least impressive crime documentary. Either way, we were already building a skill

the band would later depend on: **finding the hidden door**.

We wanted respect that didn't seem available at El Camino. We knew we were cool — at least in our own heads — and we weren't being treated like it. So we started making our own world: tapes, jokes, long conversations, and the growing suspicion that music could be a way out.

Living-room mile zero

After graduation, the dream finally got noisy.

Steve invited me into his mom Ethel's "off-limits" formal living room — plastic-protected couches, polished tables, the whole deal. In the beginning it was *super* off limits. You didn't just wander into that room. But when Ethel was gone, the room changed citizenship. It became the jam room.

That first real night, the constellation aligned: Chris Baustert, Kenny Bellew, Greg Herman, Steve, and me — me still on guitar back then, in the pre-history phase, before the keyboard changed the math.

We pushed the furniture aside and claimed the place like we'd paid rent. We weren't polished. We weren't coordinated. We barely had a shared vocabulary. It was experimental — like five people talking at the same time, but not about the same subject… until the groove occasionally forced us into agreement.

When the amps finally cooled, Steve wiped sweat off his bass and grinned.

"We may suck — but I'm psyched!"

That wasn't a joke. That was the mission statement.

Steve didn't need us to be good yet—he needed us to be *in it*.

Years later, listening back to those tapes, he'd still say the same thing in a different way:

"great phun, great friends, great energy…in the dream"

The room that became a dark cathedral

At some point, the living room stopped being a room and became a *setting*. Curtains drawn. Lights low. Smoke hanging in the air like a second ceiling. The place looked like a dark cathedral — but inside a house in the Valley — and we treated it like sacred space.

There were nights we'd chase Grateful Dead songs like they were portals. "Franklin's Tower." "Fire on the Mountain." The way those grooves opened up and kept opening — like the song wasn't a song, it was a road. We weren't copying the Dead so much as learning the underlying law: **a band can build a world and invite people into it.**

And once you felt that, there was no smaller version of life that made sense anymore.

And then there was the LSD jam — the one that split time. The details blur the way those nights blur, but the conclusion landed with terrifying clarity: this wasn't just *a* thing we did.

This was **the thing**.

Not in a romantic way. Not in a "this will work out" way.

More like a line had been crossed.

Or like Steve would later circle back to in his own words—half memory, half confession:

“we were blessed…to have these feelings…even briefly”

After that, everything else — school, jobs, girlfriends, whatever — started orbiting around the fact that we had found a door and we were not going back through it.

The keyboard that made room

Here’s the part I want to keep straight, because it matters.

In the early pre-history, I was playing guitar. And for a while that meant we had three guitars in the mix — too much of the same color, not enough air between it. The shift happened later, on a trip to Hong Kong with Rob Bragg. That’s where I found my first keyboard — the Casio that flipped a switch in my brain and didn’t flip back.

The keys didn’t just add another instrument. They changed the geometry of the band. Suddenly there was room. Suddenly the sound had width. That keyboard became the reason my return felt real and necessary — like I wasn’t just another guitar in the pile, I was the missing lane on the freeway.

Time, work, and the loud life we were trying to live

When I came back into the orbit, I was working at The Competition, the women’s clothing store, twelve hours a day. Long shifts. Hard hours. The kind of schedule that makes music feel like a secret you’re barely allowed to keep.

That job did buy me something, though: my Jazz Chorus amp. I earned it the slow way — hour by hour, feet on the floor — and then barely had time to play it. I had the amp, the dream, the sound in my head… and almost no hours in the day to turn it up.

It wasn't until I quit that job that the gear stopped being a trophy and started being a weapon.

Clear ash, sacred bass

Steve's first real bass was a clear-ash G&L, given to him by his father. It wasn't just an instrument — it was precious, almost mythic. That bass helped define Steve's whole presence: beautiful tone, big heart, and an intensity that could make a living room feel like a stage.

That bass wasn't just gear—it was identity.

You could hear it before you understood it.

Let's not rewrite history: we were drinking beer, some of us underage, and we were smoking weed constantly.

One morning the police showed up around six a.m. We all hid, genuinely worried we'd be arrested. Steve looked the police in the eye and deadpanned:

"We're not doing it anymore."

And they left.

It felt like a Jedi moment. We were wired and relieved and stupidly brave, so we started playing again. Eventually the cops came back. Steve delivered the same line again — same calm, same eye contact — and somehow it worked a second time.

Whew. We dodged a bullet.

We also learned something:

confidence—real or fake—could bend reality a little.

That would come in handy.

The band becomes a family

Rehearsals turned into overnight hangs. People needed showers. People needed couches. Herman and Kenny didn't always have great housing, and the band's orbit became a place to land — sometimes for sleep, sometimes just to stay awake all night and feel less alone. Nobody said it out loud, but the band was becoming the place you went when everything else didn't quite work.

And sure — girls were another goal. Kenny had a girlfriend when we met, but the rest of us were young and trying to meet beautiful people who would love us back. Sometimes we chased romance with the same strategy we used on jams: keep playing until something magical happens.

First songs, first sparks

The earliest originals didn't arrive all at once, and I want to keep the timeline straight: my first song was "Picture Without Words." Later came "Two Magic Hands." Kenny's originals came later too.

But even before the "official songs," the bigger thing was already happening: we weren't just forming a band — we were forming a family.

Not a business. Not a plan.

And definitely not something built to make money.

That part would stay true longer than it probably should have.

"not a penny for 10yrs 2months and 2days," Steve would later say, not complaining—just stating the math.

The Valley gave us our rough edges.
This living room gave us our starting line.
And once that line existed, we couldn't un-cross it.

We didn't know where it led. But we knew we weren't turning around.

"Play loud enough and the cul-de-sac becomes the cosmos."
— Steve Bryant, cassette diary, 1981

EARLY CO-CONSPIRATORS: STEVE BROWN, DAN, JIM & GARY

Before the band had a name, before we had a room we could claim, there was my brother, Steve Brown.

If Steve Bryant was the heart inside the rehearsal space, my brother Steve was the force that made me want a life where a rehearsal space mattered at all.

He was the main factor that made me want to play an instrument in a band. He got me into the Grateful Dead. He showed me — by example — that music wasn't just something you listened to. It was something you *went to*. Something you *committed to*. Something you organized your whole calendar and nervous system around.

We went to more than **350 concerts** together, and most of the time he was the one buying the tickets. He didn't just take me to shows — he pulled me into a universe.

And when I started playing my own shows, he stayed in the orbit. He was at more of my gigs than anyone else who wasn't actually in the band. Again and again, there he was: dependable, present, proud in the quiet way that matters. If

there's a consistent witness to my entire musical life — outside band members — it's him.

Then there were the co-conspirators who helped keep the doors open and the tape rolling.

Dan Briggs could do everything — act, draw, grab any instrument and make it talk. Jim Ellis showed up with a guitar that looked too beautiful and too grown-up for a living room. And across Marylee, Gary Friedman — my neighbor — shot the photos that prove any of this happened; if the early years have a visual memory, it's his.

From Dan, posted on Facebook:

"I was on that flatbed truck, playing someone's guitar down Ventura Blvd — I swear there was a trip to Hollywood too, but my memory is a messy room now.
Eventually, Kenny turned off my amp (I was horrible).
Stoned and happy, we were in a dream.
I was also at your Country Club shows." — Daniel Briggs

They weren't add-ons; they were part of the weather. The flatbed down Ventura, the stake-bed in the hills, the clubs that felt bigger because familiar faces were in the dark — our band learned to breathe in rooms those friends helped make.

And once there were witnesses, once there were tapes, once there were photos… it stopped being a hang.

It started being a history.

Chapter 2: Roots, Rockets & Rookie Chaos

By the time we understood what we were doing, we were already doing it.
Nights started in a small paneled room — incense, posters, a cracked window letting in warm air and the distant hush of traffic. A tape would be cued up and played like it was instruction, not entertainment. Then we'd turn around and try to build our own version of that feeling with whatever gear we had and whatever nerves we could keep from showing.
We weren't aiming for "tight." We were aiming for transportation.
Or as Steve would've put it, without bothering to clean it up: "tight jammin…little time left has passion and sincerity"
We didn't fully know what that meant yet—but we knew when we got close.

Beautiful chaos, on purpose

Early rehearsals weren't rehearsals. They were weather.
A groove would appear, get chased, fall apart, and then — every once in a while — snap into alignment like all five of us had suddenly agreed on the same sentence. We didn't arrange songs so much as survive them, letting sections melt into each other until something new surfaced. We'd come out of a jam and not totally know what just happened… but we'd know it mattered.
That's where the tapes became the secret weapon. Not as documentation — more like a microscope. We'd listen back and hear moments we didn't recognize while we were playing them. A riff hiding in the noise. A turn that felt accidental but had a shape. The rewind button was basically a band member.

And maybe the most honest one. It didn't care what we *thought* we played—it told us what actually happened.

The Dead in the walls

"Franklin's Tower" and "Fire on the Mountain" weren't just songs we liked. They were lessons. We'd chase those rhythms because they taught you how to stay inside a groove without killing it — how to keep the pulse steady while the colors changed overhead.
And when the room went dark — curtains drawn, lights low — it did that cathedral thing again. Not a club. Not a stage. A living room that felt like a sanctuary built for volume.
Nobody had to explain why that mattered. You either felt it, or you didn't belong there.

After the LSD jam, we started treating the whole operation differently. Not more serious in a corporate way — more serious in a devotional way. Like: if this is the thing, then we show up. We protect it. We get better for it.
There was a kind of gratitude in it too—unspoken, but real. The sense that whatever this was, it didn't happen to everyone.

Too many guitars, not enough air

For a while, the sound had a problem we couldn't solve by "trying harder": too much of the same thing happening in the same space. I was still on guitar in that early stretch — one more guitar in a room already full of them — trying to make my part matter without just getting louder.
Nobody said "too many guitars." But everybody was thinking it.

The turning point wasn't a brilliant musical decision. It was a real-life accident that became destiny: a trip through Asia

with Rob Bragg, and a cheap little keyboard I found in Hong Kong that I refused to leave behind.
Keys didn't just add notes. Keys added air. Suddenly the sound had width. Suddenly there was a place for parts instead of pileups.
At first I played like someone translating in real time — one stubborn left hand at a time. I wasn't trying to be impressive. I was trying to be useful. Over time the keyboard stopped being "the new thing" and became structural — the difference between a jam and a band.
It didn't make us better overnight. It made us *possible*.

Work, gear, and the time problem

Here's the other pressure that shaped everything: time. I was working brutal shifts at The Competition, twelve hours a day — the kind of schedule that makes you feel like music has to be smuggled into your life.
That job bought me the dream object — my Jazz Chorus amp — but for a while it was almost cruel: I had the amp, and barely the hours to plug in. When I finally quit, it wasn't just relief. It was access.
And once you have access, you don't really have an excuse anymore.

The band didn't get more serious because we had a meeting about it. The band got more serious because I could finally show up like a musician again.

"Plug me in" becomes the motto

As we started collecting real equipment — stands, cables, mics — the dynamic shifted. You could feel the band trying to become audible, trying to become something that could work outside the room.

There were little territorial moments too — young-band stuff where gear equals identity. Somebody brings a new piece of equipment and suddenly the room rearranges itself around it. I remember staking my spot: I'm here. I belong in the center of this sound.
Plug me in.
That phrase wasn't just about cables. It was about claiming space—inside the sound, inside the band.

And once vocals could actually cut through the roar, the chaos got clearer. Not smaller — clearer.

The "Spice" moment (and the tape that caught it)

There's a backyard tape where the jam spills out of "The Other One," and Kenny starts threading a chord shape through the noise. Nobody reacts in real time — we're too busy surfing the wave — but on playback you can hear a song trying to exist. Later it had a title — "Add a Little Spice to Life" — and it stopped being a moment and became a repeatable thing.
That's how a lot of the early material happened: not "someone wrote a song," but the band discovered it on tape. He was always listening for that moment—the part where it turned into something.

Rookie chaos with a purpose

We didn't just practice — we hunted places to make noise. One day we bluffed our way into Hughes Junior High by acting like we belonged there, claiming we were doing a "video project." The power tripped mid-song, and instead of stopping we kept going anyway — unplugged, laughing, stubborn, playing to the echo off lockers like it was a venue.

Other nights we rented time in studios and tried to convert raw jams into something that could survive a second listen. Parts started to harden. Songs started to hold their shape. The chaos wasn't random anymore.
It was becoming a method.
Not a clean one. But one we trusted.

The band wasn't just noise — it was survival. Every late-night jam, every blown breaker, every borrowed room was one step toward finding out who we really were.
Or at least finding out who we were when everything else got stripped away.

Interlude II: The FM Architect — From UCLA to the "Bo" Library

This is the part of the story that sounds more organized than it felt at the time.

While the MIDI rack was my "refrigerator" and the DX7 was my digital brain, I knew the gear was only as good as the hands on the keys. To ground the tech, I went to the masters.

My formal jazz foundation came from Joanne Grauer. In the L.A. scene, Joanne was a titan—a Juilliard-trained prodigy who had played with Stanley Turrentine and Gabor Szabo.

Sitting at the piano with her was a masterclass in sophistication. She didn't just teach notes; she taught me about "deliciously savvy" structures and how to find a groove that was both funky and "unaffected." She was brilliant and demanding; on the good days, she was breathtakingly clear and loving. From her, I learned the discipline of the L.A.

studio world—the precision needed to make a jazz trio "tower above the rest."

Then there was the soul. For that, I went to Ronnie Barron.

Ronnie was a New Orleans legend, a "blue-eyed soul" singer and pianist who had been a key sideman for everyone from Dr. John to Tom Waits and Ry Cooder. Taking lessons from Ronnie was like being baptized in the Mississippi River. He was the original "Reverend Ether," the persona that actually inspired his friend Mac Rebennack to become Dr. John.

Ronnie taught me the "insatiable grooves" of the New Orleans West Bank and how to make a piano "bubble up" and slink in the shadows of a song. If Joanne gave me the architectural blueprints for jazz, Ronnie gave me the "majick stick" for the R&B soul that would eventually define the Tur't'lz most danceable moments.

Between the academic rigors of UCLA, the sophisticated jazz of Grauer, and the New Orleans "hoodoo" of Barron, I was building a sonic arsenal that was way too big for just a garage band. I was ready for the Palomino. I was ready for anything.

Chapter 3: First Fans, Found Family, and the Grind

By late ’83, the chaos we’d been shaping into a method finally found a target: an audience.
It wasn’t formal. It wasn’t announced the way “real bands” announce things. But the tapes started moving faster than we could track. Flyers stopped feeling like optimism and started feeling like coordinates. A friend of a friend would show up with a six-pack and that look that said: I heard there’s something happening here.
And suddenly the living room wasn’t just our lab anymore. It was a secret venue.

Steve drew a turtle in shades. I scrawled LOUD / FREE / BYOB like it was scripture. We hit the neighborhoods with our DIY gospel—Reseda, Winnetka, anywhere we could tape paper without getting caught. Forty-eight hours later, people were knocking like they’d been given a password.
“Is this where the Pur’p’l Tur’t’lz play?”

They weren’t just party crashers. They were tape traders, music nerds, storytellers with strong opinions and better memories than ours. Between songs the real noise wasn’t our amps—it was the debate: which year was the best year, which bootleg was actually a masterpiece, who was “authentic,” who was “a phase,” what counted as a real show, what counted as a real life.
We were playing music, sure. But something else was happening:
We were building a tribe.
Or as Steve would’ve probably boiled it down:
“great friends…great energy…havin fun and in the dream”

It wasn't glamorous. Couches disappeared under strangers. Pizza vanished before it cooled. Somebody always needed a ride. Somebody always needed a place to land. But for the first time I understood how a band could be bigger than its members. Music was the excuse.
Community was the destination.
Nobody said it that clearly at the time—but everybody felt it.

"They weren't shows; they were turbo-charged living-room potlucks with loud guitars."
— Greg Herman, 2024 interview

Brown Brothers Presents

The crown jewel came one weekend when my folks were out of town.
Somebody scored something "for inspiration," and by nine o'clock the room was sealed—curtains tight, lamps low, that unmistakable feeling like the air had thickened and the house had become its own weather system.

We didn't play a set.
We played a night.

Kenny balanced on the coffee table, wringing whale sounds out of his guitar. Chris treated the floor tom like a ceremonial drum. I held a synth note so long I forgot what key I started in. Dawn arrived and we were tangled in cables, blaming a knocked-over bench on "redecorating."
We called it music. We also knew it was something else: a shared hallucination with a backbeat.

And here's the part that matters—because it became the model:

When you lock the doors, dim the lights, and commit to the groove, the room stops being a room. It becomes a vessel. A dark cathedral in a house. And everybody inside feels it: this isn't background music.
This is why we're here.
That feeling—that shift from hang to something else—was the whole point, even if we didn't have language for it yet.

The characters in the room

As the circle widened, the band started feeling like more than the five of us. The edges got populated.
Rob Bragg showed up in stories and in person—part friend, part orbit—the kind of presence that could turn a normal night into a myth by simply walking into it. People became recurring characters: the ones who always brought food, the ones who always brought extra tapes, the ones who always brought questions, the ones who always brought trouble.

And because we were young and recording everything, those characters didn't just pass through.
They got archived.
The tapes weren't just our sketchbook anymore.
They were our witness.
They didn't forget—even when we did.

Crossing scenes

I ended up at Kinko's Copies for a while, and it wasn't just a paycheck. It was part of the Tur't'lz circulatory system. Late nights at the copy machine produced half our flyers, and it's where I met Calvin Black from Urban Dread—a reggae band

that was everything we weren't: tight, professional, constantly gigging.

We loved them. One night we tried to mash worlds together —a shared party, shared bill, shared sense that the whole Valley was one big house if you knew the right doors.

Their place felt like stepping into another ecosystem: lights, décor, a vibe that said somebody here knows what they're doing. We opened, they played, then we swapped back and forth: rock into reggae, reggae into rock. The crowd was moving. It felt like a future.

Then it collapsed.

A group barged in—I never fully knew who they were or what they wanted—and the night flipped from celebration to survival. Windows went. Furniture went. The room turned into a fight. We defended our gear with whatever we had, because when you're broke and your instrument is your identity, protecting it doesn't feel optional.

By the time the cops arrived, the party was over in the worst way.

The aftermath had that dead, stunned quiet that follows chaos. It was a reminder: music could build community, but it couldn't always shield us from the world outside the room. The room could hold magic.
It couldn't control what walked through the door.

"Beach Babe," the almost-movie song

Around that same era we got tugged into a side quest: write a song for a beach movie.
We didn't know how legit it was—we just knew it was

flattering that anyone outside our cul-de-sac orbit wanted us for anything. So we did the most Pur'p'l Tur't'lz thing possible:
We tried to write a song to order.

It didn't quite fit us. It never fully clicked. But I don't want to lose the truth inside it: Chris Baustert was key in shaping that song, and it exists somewhere in our recordings like a fossil from the period when we were willing to say yes to anything just to see what would happen.
Not everything worked.
But everything counted.

The Hardshells are born

Out of all that madness, our first real fan tribe took shape: the Hardshells.

They weren't spectators.
They were co-conspirators.

They printed turtle tees, ran flyer missions, helped haul gear, helped feed people, helped keep the whole thing moving. They were couch-surfers, cable-haulers, snack-runners—and sometimes the difference between "we can do this" and "we can't."
They weren't outside the band.
They were part of how the band functioned.

"Tur't'lz shows were like mini-Dead lots—food, weird crafts, someone doing something that made no sense until 3 a.m."
— Jerry "Gongles" Gonzales, first-gen Hardshell

Grinding forward

Behind the laughter and the chaos, real life pressed in. Steve had family responsibilities. Chris and Steve played hooky like it was a second instrument. I went to Pierce College because my parents required it if I wanted to stay at home. Compared to some of my friends, it was a sweet deal—but it also came with pressure: if I was going to take music seriously, it had to be worth their support.

Promotion became an obsession. We printed flyers, stuffed envelopes, and even set up a hotline on Steve's answering machine:
"You've reached the Pur'p'l Tur't'lz..."

It became part of the lore—not because it was clever, but because it was real effort made audible.

And the art mattered. People like Racer—Tracy—didn't just make us look legit. She built our visual identity like it was infrastructure: logos, flyers that looked like they came from another planet, merch printed in a garage with the kind of endurance you only see in someone who quietly outworks the room.
That wasn't "support."
That was muscle.

The music was the heartbeat. But the family we stumbled into—wild, messy, fragile, unforgettable—was the real story. And once that family formed, it changed the stakes.

Chapter 4: Girls, Couches & 4 A.M. Conversations

Once people started showing up, the band stopped being an activity and became a habitat.
It wasn't something we did anymore.
It was where we lived.

The motivation wasn't just riffs—it was the chase. Kenny was the only one with a steady girlfriend. The rest of us figured the right chord change might conjure romance… or at least someone to split a burrito with. We weren't sophisticated about it. We were young, loud, and convinced the best version of ourselves lived one good night away.

Between "shows," we lived like migrating turtles. Herman and Kenny crashed wherever the amps landed—sofas, throw rugs, the floor, the foot of a bed when the living room overflowed. Sleep was optional; togetherness was mandatory. And if you stayed tangled in the same extension cords long enough, something always happened: a new riff, a new crush, a new argument, a new bond that didn't feel optional anymore.
Nobody had a schedule.
But everybody knew where to be.

From rehearsal to ritual

Rehearsals morphed into parties without warning. Laughter bounced off stucco walls, barbecue smoke tangled with feedback, and someone always showed up with just enough confidence to jump in—which meant the chemistry shifted constantly.

Some nights were basically set-building: tighten a section, fix the trainwreck transitions, get the vocals loud enough to matter. Other nights were pure social gravity—the band playing because the room demanded it, because nobody wanted the night to end, because silence felt like a trap.

Sundays often started as "just a tune-up" and ended as ritual: play until sunset, eat whatever showed up, then collapse into a heap like the house had survived weather again.

It wasn't rehearsal.
It was therapy disguised as noise.
Or like Steve might've said in his own shorthand:
"great energy…great time…in the dream"

The couch economy

This is the part a lot of bands never admit: we weren't just sharing music.
We were sharing survival.

People needed showers. People needed couches. People needed to not go home. In our orbit, housing wasn't always stable, and the band became a place to land—sometimes for sleep, sometimes just to stay awake until daylight and feel less alone.

Nobody filled out an application.
You just… stayed.

You learn a lot about your friends when you see them at 4 a.m. You learn who goes quiet. You learn who gets philosophical. You learn who gets mean when they're tired. You learn who becomes tender and who becomes a problem. You learn what you can forgive. You learn what you can't.

And somehow you keep playing anyway.
Because stopping wasn't really an option.

The 4 a.m. symposium

When the gear was finally stowed, the real set began: the talk.

We argued about music like it was theology. We tried to solve love like it was a chord progression. We diagnosed the future, predicted the past, confessed things we'd never say in daylight. Someone would notice the first streaks of sunrise and mumble, "One more tune?" and before anyone could answer, the instruments would be in hands again.

Those rent-free arenas—garages, living rooms, carports—were where music and friendship fused. Steve documented everything on cheap cassettes and whatever video gear he could keep running, sometimes leaving it on long enough that we forgot it was there. The archive caught the missteps, the laughter, the accidental brilliance, the fights, the reconciliations—the unglamorous truth of a band becoming a life.

He wasn't just recording songs.
He was recording evidence.
Proof that whatever this was—it was real.

By early '84, our ragtag noise was sharpening into a band. Handwritten set lists replaced scribbled scraps. Broken strings got swapped mid-week instead of ignored. The misspelled banner—Pur'p'l Tur't'lz—wasn't just a sound anymore.

It was a flag.

And once a flag exists, the world starts testing whether you can carry it.
Or break you trying.

Chapter 5: Backyards, Breakthroughs & Our Own Little Dead Show

By mid-'84, owning a lawn mower meant owning a venue.

Most evenings we hauled amps into somebody's backyard—driveways, patios, even empty lots—looking for one working outlet and praying the neighbors were out of town. Cinder blocks became speaker stands. Extension cords ran through sprinklers like we were daring electricity to kill us. Charcoal smoke tangled with cheap weed as dusk slid toward curfew.

Chris's kit rattled fence boards. Steve Bryant's bass thumped into our sneakers. Kenny's guitar cut a clean line through the haze. And me—I wedged my keys wherever they fit, sometimes balanced on patio furniture like a bad dare, trying to make a keyboard feel inevitable in a world that still wanted us to be "just guitars."

We'd stumble through a cover or two to get the room warm, then test-drive originals. Mistakes weren't accidents; they were part of the show. By the third song, the lawn turned into a slow-dance floor and a meditation circle at the same time—people swaying, somebody laughing too hard, somebody staring at a porch light like it was the moon.

Backyards weren't glamorous.
But they were ours.

Every fence line felt like a stage. Every porch light was an accidental spotlight. And every night we proved something small and important: the band didn't need permission.
Or as Steve might've summed it up later:
"great phun…great friends…great energy"

The van & the burden

My Toyota Celica could barely carry my own gear, let alone a band's worth of chaos. So I made the "practical" move: I bought a Ford Econoline van—basically a camper on wheels.

Perfect in theory.
In practice, it meant one thing: I was the driver.

I picked everyone up, dropped everyone off, loaded the amps, and ran the circuit night after night. Herman rode shotgun, talking without breathing—Dead lore, oddball prog obsessions, whatever fuel kept him going—while I white-knuckled through Valley traffic, trying not to kill my bandmates before we even got to the gig.

In my private fantasy of stardom, a tour bus came with a driver.
Instead, I was chauffeuring the Pur'p'l Tur't'lz in circles around Reseda.

The van smelled like sweat, beer, and blown speakers. It was also where half our bad ideas turned into actual plans. That rolling box was rehearsal before rehearsal—arguments, jokes, setlist dreams, and the unspoken agreement that we were all in, even when "in" was inconvenient.
Nobody loved the van.
Everybody needed it.

Holiday fireworks

Our backyard circuit had landmark nights—little myth stones you can still trip over decades later.

On the Fourth of July in Granada Hills, we turned a pool party into patriotic pandemonium. Bottle rockets and

Roman candles stitched the sky while we tried to keep a groove alive—until a cop's megaphone cut straight through the music:

"Pack up in fifteen, or we impound everything!"

We moved faster than I've ever seen us move. Not because we were scared of getting in trouble—because we were scared of losing the gear. You can survive a busted party. You can't survive a missing PA.

Other nights were at Ethel's. Sometimes my parents escaped to Palm Springs and the house became a stage. Dennis Adkins's shoebox rental became party HQ—sessions that ran long enough to blur into the next day. People showed up with tape recorders and cameras like the Valley had decided to stand close to the noise just to see what would happen.
The crowd wasn't just watching.
They were documenting.

Halloween under lights

Halloween '84 pulled us indoors when The Wildest invited us to open at the L.A. Cabaret—a tiny comedy club that suddenly felt like Carnegie Hall because it had a stage and a real schedule.

Our flyers had done their job. The room filled with tie-dye, skeleton masks, pirate hats—our people, somehow, in a real club. The stage was barely big enough for Chris's kit and our amps, but it didn't matter. We opened strong, then dropped an original early enough to learn something important:

We weren't just a backyard phenomenon.

At some point I spotted my brother Mark and his wife Susie dancing—actually there, in person—and it hit me hard. Of course it was his birthday. October 31. But still. There's a special shock in seeing your "real life" and your "band life" collide under club lights.

And then there was my other brother—Steve Brown—the one who lit the fuse in the first place.

Steve was the reason I wanted to play in a band at all. He got me into the Grateful Dead. He was my concert partner for the long haul—350+ shows together, most of the tickets bought by him, most of the nights made possible by his simple, stubborn belief that music was worth chasing. And he showed up to my gigs more than anyone who wasn't in the band. That kind of loyalty isn't background. It's scaffolding.

When your brother keeps showing up, night after night, it quietly tells you: This is real. Keep going.

Not long after, we played behind It's Only Rock & Roll Records on Ventura Boulevard. Milk crates became a stage. Tie-dye sheets became a backdrop. Record bins inside, our turtle logo outside. We opened for The Wildest again, and the line between "party band" and "real band" blurred a little more.

Clubs didn't have sprinklers shorting out the power or landlords leaning over the fence.
They had something else: expectation.
Start on time. Finish on time. Prove you belong on the bill.

Breakthroughs

Backyards were wild and free, but rooms full of strangers offered a different kind of validation. When people stayed for the second set—or shouted for an encore—it landed harder than applause from a party that had nowhere else to go.

Still, I don't want to romanticize one "big moment." The breakthroughs came from repetition: night after night, lawn after lawn, room after room, learning how to keep the band moving even when the night didn't cooperate.

We were becoming reliable—without losing the danger.
That's a hard line to walk.
We didn't know how to protect it yet.

We weren't just learning how to be a band.
We were learning how to last.

Hansen Dam — our own little Dead show

Some gigs you get invited to.
Others you hustle your way onto.
And then there are the ones you create because you want them to exist.

Hansen Dam was that.

It wasn't a club. It wasn't a backyard. It was a band shell in a public park, and the idea was simple: play free, play long, and make it feel huge. These were shows we put on ourselves —our way of saying thank you to the people who kept showing up.

We didn't treat it like a casual park jam. We hired a sound company and put a real PA in the open air. The concrete shell turned into our little amphitheater, and for a few hours the park became our room.

Our people were good at parks. They showed up like a moving color field: tie-dye, bare feet, familiar faces. Some danced right up front. Others lay back on the grass and soaked it in.

This is where “Franklin’s Tower” and “Fire on the Mountain” stopped being covers and became an operating system. You could feel the crowd lock in on the same internal compass: don’t rush it, don’t choke it, let it open.

And that openness—out in daylight, with no roof, no last call, no neighbor pounding a wall—changed the band. Without a clock on the wall, the music stopped being nervous. Songs could breathe. Jams could wander way out and still find their way home because nobody was forcing the landing.

People partied hard. But what I remember most is the tone: positive, friendly, self-contained.
Weird without being mean.

Hansen Dam is also where we got captured the way it actually felt. A friend of mine from Kinko’s—Sarge—took the only photos we have from one of those events. They’re some of the best images of the group: the banner, the gear sprawled like we’d moved in, the band mid-flight, the crowd turning pavement into a dancefloor in full daylight. Looking at them now, you can almost hear the air moving.

If the early years were about learning to play together, and the club years were about learning to survive inside the machine, then Hansen Dam was something else:

It was us, for us, with our people—
our own little Dead show under the sun.

Chapter 6: The Name, The Flag, and the Moment It Became Real

Guerrilla branding

Marketing wasn't budgets or strategy.
It was toner, tape, and streetlights.

We plastered telephone poles and pizza-parlor cork boards with turtles in shades and ransom-note lettering. Our art-scene allies—Racer, Vegetable, Achim, Saffron—turned the flyers into psychedelic artifacts: collage, hand lettering, impossible color, little jokes that made you stare long enough to absorb the date and time.

Kinko's became a nerve center. Flyers got born there, and the name started leaking into other scenes. The misspelled turtle began showing up where it didn't "belong": on binders, jackets, backstage doors, bathroom walls.

Sometimes the apostrophes wandered. Sometimes people dropped half the letters.
It didn't matter.
The point was the flag.

Once people started recognizing it—even incorrectly—you knew something was working.

Positive Views

Around that same time, I started a fanzine called *Positive Views*. The idea behind it was simple: only write about music, art, performance, or anything else in a positive way. If we didn't like something, we just didn't include it. No cheap shots, no takedowns, no building ourselves up by tearing

somebody else down. The whole point was to spotlight what moved us.

Before long, *Positive Views* became a kind of newsletter for the Pur'p'l Tur't'lz too. We all had a hand in it one way or another. Some people contributed art or articles. Some helped run copies and put the thing together. Like the flyers, it was homemade and communal—another extension of the world we were building around the band.

There was also a little strategy in it, I'll admit. Publishers sometimes got into events for free, or at least got closer to the action. I understood that this could be a way in—another angle into shows, scenes, and conversations I wanted to be part of. If the idea took off, maybe it would help me meet more people in the industry too.

We handed copies out at our own gigs and at Grateful Dead shows, where it fit naturally into that whole handmade culture of tapers, traders, artists, and self-appointed historians.

Looking back, *Positive Views* was more than a fanzine.
It was part philosophy, part band newsletter, part calling card.
It was one more way of saying: we're here, we care, and we're making our own little corner of the culture.

The name becomes a password

Once it spread, the name turned into shorthand.
Bookers squinted at it, tried to say it out loud, shrugged, and put us on the bill anyway.

Fans said it wrong. Flyers printed it differently. Voicemail messages mangled it completely.

And somehow, that helped.

Because if you knew it—even a little—you were already inside.

The band stops being a theory

By the time we hit ’84, the revolving door of jam sessions had steadied into something more permanent.

Five of us—Kenny, Herman, Steve, Chris, and me—started showing up like we meant it. Same faces. Same gear. Plug in and go.

And one night it stopped feeling like “a great hang” and started feeling like a band.

We launched into “Scarlet Begonias,” and for once there were no awkward resets, no half-arguments mid-verse, no drifting into the weeds before the chorus even arrived. Steve hit the bass hard enough it felt like the room moved, then turned and shouted his trademark:

“I’M PSYCHED!”

It was goofy. It was also true.

That shout became an ignition switch—our reminder that the point wasn’t perfection.
The point was commitment.
Or in Steve’s shorthand:
“i’m psyched…we’re on!!!”

Rehearsal kingdoms

Our rehearsal spots were borrowed spaces, which gave every night a charge of urgency.

Ethel's formal living room was our first headquarters—loud, off-limits, temporary. My parents' place became a stage whenever they escaped town, with the unspoken rule that we'd vanish before they returned and the neighbors could build a case against us.

Knowing we could lose the room at any time made us play harder.
We didn't waste the night.

Chris's drums boomed off stucco walls, patched together from whatever kept them standing. Kenny's guitar was already a laser beam—sharp attack, perfectly timed grins. Herman played like he was narrating the night in fuzz. My keys were still cheap and stubborn, but they started finding their place under the guitars instead of fighting them.

And Steve—equal parts thunder and charm—held the whole thing together.
If something started to fall apart, he pushed harder until it didn't.

The first originals that stuck

Covers were our common language.
Originals were the claim we were trying to stake.

The early songs didn't arrive like lightning bolts. They arrived like discoveries: a riff that wouldn't die, a chorus that survived three rehearsals, a line that made us laugh and then refuse to delete it.

“Nowhere to Turn” started feeling less like an experiment and more like a statement. “Get Up (And Do It)” gave us swagger. “Skipping Through the Lily Fields” carried Herman’s strange, dreamy stamp.

We were still figuring out structures, bridges, endings. Sometimes a “new song” was just a shape we kept returning to.

But the intent had changed.

We weren’t only stretching jams anymore.
We were trying to write.

And somewhere in there, the band stopped being just a band and started becoming a little world.

Handmade mythology

At the time it didn’t feel grand. It just felt like people showing up. Friends bringing friends. Somebody dancing. Somebody crashing on a couch. Somebody making a flyer for the next thing before the current thing was even over.

But something real was forming.

You could feel it in the handmade stuff that started springing up around us—flyers, hotline blurbs, doodles, inside jokes, little scraps of mythology passed around like sacred nonsense. Nobody was waiting for permission to make it official. People were making the world themselves with Xeroxes, markers, typewriters, bad spelling, and pure enthusiasm.

It wasn’t slick.
It was alive.

Even the band name refused to sit still. Depending on who made the flyer or called in the ad, we were Purpl Turtlz, Purple Turtles, Pur'p'l Tur't'lz, or some new mutation no one had seen before.

Looking back, it feels exactly right.
We were still becoming ourselves.
The name was too.

The push toward real gigs

That's when someone finally showed up talking like the world outside our rooms was a real thing.

Enter Steve Miller—no, not that Steve Miller, though we didn't mind the confusion.

He was a few years older and carried a spiral notebook stuffed with contacts and schemes. He didn't talk about tone or vibe. He talked about guarantees, load-in times, drink tickets, start times, and what it meant to be professional enough to get asked back.

He also talked about the Grateful Dead constantly, which meant we trusted him immediately.

But the important part was this:
He turned our beer-soaked promises into actual dates.

Suddenly there were gigs on the calendar that weren't house parties—opening slots, club nights, real rooms with sound techs who did not care about our mythology.

It was the first time someone treated us like a band instead of a hangout.

And once that starts, the world tests you.

Not with romance.
With logistics.

That's when you find out if you're real.

The scene forms

And what was forming around us wasn't just a schedule. It was a scene.

People started showing up not just for the songs, but for the whole feeling around them—friends, flyers, chaos, inside jokes, late nights, borrowed rooms, and the sense that something was actually happening.

Before long, the band wasn't just providing a soundtrack.
It was becoming a meeting place.
A social life.
A loose little tribe.

If somebody was in the orbit, they mattered.

That's one reason the old benefit flyers hit me so hard now. They remind me that this wasn't just a gig machine. If somebody needed help, people stepped up. A flyer got made, the word got spread, amps got plugged in, and a night became a way to hold somebody up.

That was part of the beauty of the whole thing.
The music brought people together, but what kept it alive was the human part—people showing up for each other in real ways, not just cheering from the sidelines.

The sign

That was the sign.

The band had stopped being a theory.
It had started becoming a world.

And once you're living inside a world you built—
you don't get to pretend it's just a hobby anymore.

Chapter 8: Opening for Go Ahead

By the time we opened for Go Ahead, the Pur'p'l Tur't'lz had crossed an invisible line.

We weren't just the band from the backyard anymore. We weren't just the weirdly spelled name on homemade flyers, or the house-party legends your friend's older brother swore were better than half the bands in the clubs. We were still all of that—but now we were stepping into a bigger current. The kind of current that ran straight toward the Grateful Dead orbit we'd been studying, loving, and building around for years.

For us, this wasn't just another gig.
This was contact.

Jerry Garcia was down at the time, and the Dead universe had split into side roads—Go Ahead, Kingfish, little offshoots that still carried the voltage of the main line. If you were a Valley Deadhead in those years, you paid attention to every one of those moves. So when we got the chance to open for Go Ahead at the Country Club in Reseda, it didn't feel like a booking.

It felt like a message:
keep going.

A lot of hands helped make that night happen. Steve Miller was part of the push, and Kenny's Why Knot Productions helped pull the event together. The whole thing had that familiar Pur'p'l Tur't'lz feeling—half real promotion, half hustle, half miracle. Which, yes, adds up to more than one whole. That was usually the math.

What I remember first is the charge in the room before we even hit a note. The Country Club wasn't somebody's living room. It wasn't a public park. It was a real venue, with real expectations, real backstage traffic, and real consequences if you blew it. That kind of room changes your posture before it changes your sound.

And then there was the other layer:
we knew who was in the building.

Bill Kreutzmann. Brent Mydland. Bob Weir.

Just writing those names now, I can still feel the way they altered the oxygen. We were trying to act like musicians with a job to do, but underneath that we were still the same Dead-fed kids from the Valley who had built our own little scene by studying the bigger one. We knew what it meant to be on the same bill. Even if only for a night, even if only as the opener, the distance between the source and the followers had suddenly shrunk.

So we did what bands do when the moment is too big to fully process:
we set up our gear and played.

I don't remember that set as neat or polished. I remember it as committed. We played with the kind of focus that only happens when adrenaline finally becomes useful. No irony. No holding back. No playing it safe in hopes of seeming professional. We played like ourselves—because by then that was the only thing we had that was worth bringing.

Or like Steve would've probably put it later:
"we were on…fricken on!!!"

And when it worked, you could feel it.

Not “success” in some giant career sense. Not a spotlight from heaven. Just that unmistakable click when the room recognizes that you belong there long enough to finish what you came to do.

Backstage was its own kind of education. The love in that scene was real. The boundaries weren’t always real. Everybody wanted closer access, closer contact, a better story to tell the next day. Which is another way of saying: chaos was never far away. Nights like that depended on somebody keeping one eye on the magic and one eye on the exits.

What mattered most to me was simpler than all the mythology surrounding it. We had made it into one of the rooms we used to dream about. We had shared a bill with players from the world that shaped us. And we had done it without changing our name, our sound, or our crooked little identity just to fit somebody else’s idea of legitimacy.

Opening for Go Ahead didn’t make us famous.
It made us dangerous to our own limits.

Because once you’ve touched that level of possibility, you stop being satisfied with just surviving the weekend. You start thinking bigger. Louder. Further out.

That’s the blessing and the problem.

After a night like that, the old rooms start to feel too small. And once that happens, there’s no going back.

Field Note A: Larry Saltman — "Pur'p'l Tur't'lz Open for Go Ahead"

Notes from the journals of Larry Saltman — "Purple Tur't'lz Open for Go Ahead in 1986"

Larry Saltman was one of those early Hardshells who didn't just show up — he worked. When the Turtl'z opened for Go Ahead at Chuck Landis' Country Club in Reseda (1986), Larry was pulled into stage-managing the night. What follows is Larry's memory from his journals, in his own words.

We were all raving deadheads having a good time with the music – the scene – and, most of all; with each other. In 1986 I had become an avid fan of the Grateful Dead and a working fan of the Turtl'z. Shortly after getting into the Dead, I met a couple guys that would become lifelong friends; DA and Bubba. I'll share more about these truly great friends another time. DA was hosting the Purple Turtl'z, giving them a place to play in the living room of his house in the early 80's. It was a great scene.

We were all on the same page and enjoyed delving into all that the 'turned on' GD crowd had to offer. I found in the guys in the Purple Turtl'z (PT) a special kinship. Right around 1984, I was hollering for more at PT concerts and found myself helping them pack up, set up and whatever they needed. Their personal crowd was fun and I swiftly gravitated to them.

Right before the summer of 1986, Jerry Garcia had lapsed into a diabetic coma after some drug abuse and the band started doing 'side shows' as Go Ahead and Kingfish; with Kingfish being a passion project for Bob Weir. Of course, we

ate it up – wanting anything we could get to stoke the fires of our passion for the vibe that allowed us to be ourselves and the music to bound us. Things in our lives became less important than being a part of what was going on. PT were heavily influenced by the Dead and local folks (like me) dove head first into any event that smacked of that vibe.

A guy named Kenny started a promotional effort he named "Why Knot Productions" and promoted many PT performances. Kenny worked with Steve Miller (another true friend and a Manager of PT) to pull together a number of events for the PT. I acted as a grip for many of them. The best of those gigs was the time the PT opened for Go Ahead, which served as a prequel act to the Kingfish performance.

This happened at 'Chuck Landis' Country Club' in Reseda, Ca; my stomping grounds. I grew up a mile or so from the venue. As a teenager, my crowd partied on the streets of Reseda, Van Nuys, and – in general – the San Fernando Valley - Late 1983, which I will refer to as "The Valley".

You'll find my various adventures as a teenager in the valley in other notes of mine, but let me assure you: we had lots of fun on the streets. Drinking, fighting, loving, drug abuse and lots of 'hero worship' music.

Music was just starting to change, where old school rockers like Rick Derringer, Edgar Winter, George Thorogood were singing about getting laid and drinking was shifting to more of a hippy vibe (although with the same theme). When the Dead came into my life, everything changed.

Flash forward to 1986 and Jerry is in the hospital in a diabetic coma and Why Knot productions and the PT got a gig with side projects of the healthy (?) members of the GD. I

was supporting them both. Kenny asked me to stage manage the event.

I'm going to refrain from going into the absolutely over the top drug/alcohol use by everybody back stage, other than to say it happened and I was a part of it. As part of my 'job' (I was paid $0 for the gig), I herded acts on stage, helped with moving equipment and kept an eye on the behavior back stage. I may not have been the best person for the job, but I took my basic responsibilities seriously. The way I saw it, it was my job to hustle the bands on and off stage and make sure our guests – namely Bobby Weir, Brent Mydland and Bill Kreutzmann – were comfortable.

Brent and Bill were having a great time backstage; slugging beers and partying it up with the locals. Bobby, however was much more private; staying alone in the 'grand' suite of the back stage area. The area Bobby was in hanging in was a back stage room that looked like a cheap motel with a wet bar.

I checked on him a couple times and he was fine until – one time - he gave me a weird look. After asking him if he was OK again, he said nothing, but looked past me. A local Deadhead was squatting in the corner, behind the door – staring at Bobby. I told the dude, whom I recognized from PT concerts, to get the fuck out – and he did.

The PTs were finishing their set and Go Ahead was getting ready to play. Go Ahead was made up of Billy, Brent and a couple session musicians. Bobby stayed up stairs until he was called for his performance in his own 'sideband', Kingfish. Kingfish used all the same musicians with Bobby joining them to take the lead.

Everything went great. The vibes – and our intoxication level - was through the roof. Go Ahead finished their set and Bobby came down stairs from his room to join the band for a rendition of Kingfish. Immediately, everyone back stage – and I mean everyone, including my 'employer', Kenny – was all over Bobby.

I shouted the crowd down and demanded that they all get behind the red line that was painted on the floor about six feet away from the stage - for just this reason. As I expected, they all fell in line and backed off of Bobby. Bobby, who was visibly relieved, turned to me and thanked me for my actions. I mentioned to him that they really didn't mean harm, they just loved him and were usually separated by thousands of people. He thanked me again and hit the stage.

The set was great, everyone danced their asses off and worked up a sweat, throwing it around as the music took all of us away.

After Kingfish finished, their roadies were breaking down the equipment. I saw that Billy was yelling at their crew and spun a drum skin at one of his guys. Jumping in, I asked Billy what his problem was and he yells at me that, "these fuckers didn't buy beer and now the club won't sell it to us!" The show ended well after 2:00 AM, the cut off for sale of alcohol.

Dropping all of my responsibilities to Kenny and Why Knot Productions, I told Billy, who was now joined by a pissed off Brent, that I had a cooler full of beer in my truck that I couldn't touch all night, as I was so busy.

Billy and Brent perked right up. Asking where this beer might be. I showed them to my truck, immediately out the back door of the Country Club.

We sat on my tailgate drinking beer and sharing a couple doobies and my (always handy) flask of bourbon until the sun started showing. I still have the drum skin Billy spun at his grip.

By any measure in my life, this was a memorable event for me. Apparently, I was not alone in this memory. The following summer, Jerry had bounced back from his diabetic coma, learned to play the guitar again and made it to the following summer tour.

My buddy, Happy Dave (the happiest Dave I have ever known), had just bought an old Blue Bird school bus and was shy to drive it. I drove the beast to the Ventura show that summer and we managed to secure a great parking place directly in back of the backstage area of the concert.

Again, I will defer further story telling of the tremendous events of the weekend for another time - with exception of this wee tidbit. A stretch limo pulled into the small camping area we had parked the bus and, as the back door opens to let out the occupants; a huge German Shepherd comes out of no where and, snarling, jumps into the limo, attacking the passengers. Without a thought, I jumped into the limo and grabbed the shepherd by his collar and threw him over my shoulder, where he welped away. Brent Mydland looks up at me from the back of the limo and asks, “Larry?”.

Larry’s “red line” detail says a lot about that era: the love was real, the boundaries weren’t, and sometimes the

difference between chaos and magic was one person paying attention.

Chapter 9: Camp Templin — Where the Shell Got Hard

After opening for Go Ahead, we weren't hungry for bigger numbers—we were hungry for bigger air.
The Valley was starting to feel like a box: too many rules, too many walls, too many clocks. Clubs had last call, neighbors had complaints, and even our best nights came with an invisible hand hovering over the breaker switch.

So we chased the oldest solution we knew:
Get out of town. Bring the gear. Make a world.

That world became Camp Templin, tucked west of Castaic Lake, where scrub pines replaced streetlights and a generator's hum was the closest thing to a blessing.

We caravanned up the Grapevine with amps, kegs, coolers, and extension cords coiled like snakes. By the time we rolled in, the clearing was already alive—VW buses in circles, campfires throwing orange light on tapestries, the whole place vibrating with that pre-show feeling: anything could happen because nothing was managed.

And for a while, it was exactly what we were chasing.

Music echoing through the trees. Strangers becoming friends. A bunch of cul-de-sac Deadheads turning into cosmic voyagers for a night. The band played deep, loose, fearless—like the woods had removed the ceiling from our sound.

Then something shifted.

Templin didn't just feel wild. It felt unfenced. And unfenced is where the beautiful things live… right alongside the things with teeth.

There's a moment in this story that doesn't belong to my voice alone. It belongs to somebody who was there that night, early in the tribe, watching the dream happen in real time.

So I'm going to hand the mic to one of the first true Hardshells: Phil Ide.

Phil Ide's Memory of Templin Station

Phil's version starts exactly where ours did—mid-'80s Valley kids, Reagan on TV, LSD and the Grateful Dead cracking open a new map. He talks about the tribe we were trying to join: the whole menagerie of Deadheads—hippies, bikers, chemists, intellectuals, pirates, adventurers—everybody chasing the same sunshine daydream in a thousand different costumes.

He remembers how the scene traveled before phones did: word of mouth, record store bulletin boards, flyers, mailed announcements—the grapevine, literal and metaphorical.

And he remembers the drive up to Templin: cooler full of sodas (too young to score booze), snacks, super-sized M&M's courtesy of his mom… plus "other sacraments," because this was the era of bold sincerity and questionable planning.

When the band hit, Phil says it felt like lift-off—dust, dancing, trance-state joy. Time standing still. Bodies turning into one spinning organism around a sound.

But then he noticed a new presence—older, grittier, louder in the wrong way. A guy pushing powders, acting belligerent. It was the kind of energy you might expect at a giant Dead lot, but it landed different here because this was supposed to be ours. Smaller. Safer. Home-field weird.

Phil's memory reaches for a sentence I recognize in my bones:

The night had magic… until it didn't.

If we had a fixer back then, it was Robert Flores—Flo. And Templin Highway gave him plenty to fix. Flo was one of those guys who always seemed to know somebody, have a lead, or spot the next move before the rest of us did. His memory of that night captures the danger, absurdity, and improvisational survival instinct of that whole era better than any polished summary ever could.

Flo: The Fixer, If We Had One
"I plead the fifth!

You have my permission to tell any story you want, with my blessings.

Ask Caren Ginsburg about the guy who put a gun in my eye socket—she was sitting right next to me. That was at Templin Highway. Moey was selling hot dogs, and the same guy took a hot dog at gunpoint.

That was also the day a motorcycle flew into a ravine, killing the rider. They helicoptered the body out. At that point, the Sheriff's Department turned their attention to us, asking for permits and telling us to leave.

Lucky for us, I knew these bikers who said we could move the party to their house in Woodland Hills. I remember getting there first, waking up their roommate, and telling him there was a party coming to his house."

That was Flo: plugged in, unfazed, and somehow already arranging the next chapter before the current one had even ended.

Back from the edge

What happened next didn't feel like the Valley anymore.

That was the point of Templin—to get away from curfews, owners, neighbors, "last call," and every other rule that made freedom feel rented.

Templin taught us the price tag that can come with freedom when it's totally off-grid: the beauty is real, and so is the danger.

After that night, we still wanted the magic. We still wanted the no one can tell us to stop feeling.

We just stopped pretending the wilderness was automatically safe because it looked beautiful in the dark.

Field Note: The Lot Shows

Templin didn't kill the dream—it sharpened it.

We still wanted the off-grid current, but we started looking for places where freedom came with fewer unknown teeth. That's where the lot shows came in: the gathering outside the gathering, the tribe assembling in asphalt daylight—vans, coolers, tapes, merch, chemistry, philosophy, and the shared hunger to keep the music going even when the official doors weren't open for us.

We didn't call them "lot shows" at first.

We just kept finding ourselves in that in-between space—between the event and the real event—where the rules got blurry and the community got loud.

And there were two that became legend in our world.

One in Ventura. One in Irvine.

Same impulse: if we couldn't get inside, we'd build the stage outside.

Chapter 10: The Lot Shows — Taking the Turtle for a Walk

By the time we started calling them “lot shows,” it wasn’t a joke anymore.

A lot show wasn’t a concert. Not exactly. A concert had a stage, a schedule, somebody with a clipboard, and rules that looked good on paper. A lot show was the opposite: music as a rumor. A temporary village built out of tailgates, thrift-store amps, borrowed extension cords, and the kind of optimism you only have when you don’t fully understand consequences yet.

Two different years. Two different venues. Two different versions of us.

Same basic deal:
We weren’t supposed to be there.

And yet—somehow—there we were.

Ventura — Parking-Lot Church

The Ventura lot show started like a dare, the kind of dare that only works because nobody wants to be the person who says no.

Someone said, “We should bring gear.”
Someone else said, “No way. They’ll shut it down.”
And then the third voice—the chaos voice—said, “Cool. I’m bringing gear.”

That’s youth math.

We arrived early enough that the asphalt still looked sleepy. The sun was just climbing. Cars rolled in slow. Trunks

opened. Coolers appeared. People nodded at each other with that instant recognition:
Oh. You're here for the same thing I'm here for.

And we did the universal loophole:
We didn't "play a show."
We set up.

Setting up is innocent. Setting up is just plugging things in. Setting up is just checking levels. Setting up is just a few chords to see if the amp is alive.

And if a small crowd happens to gather while you're doing that… well, that's not your fault. That's physics.

The first notes always felt like they came from the gear itself, like the equipment wanted to speak. A guitar line floated out over the cars. A drum pattern answered from whatever was available. Steve's bass found the pocket and suddenly the whole thing snapped into place: a groove became an announcement.

The parking lot had a pulse.

Ventura had a kind of innocence. People drifted closer like curious neighbors. The circle formed politely. The vibe was warm—more "community picnic" than "scene."

Or like Steve might've boiled it down later:
"great energy…great time…havin fun"

Even so, the shadow was there. It always is. In any lot there are edges: the ones who are too loaded too early, the ones scanning for trouble like trouble is their hobby.

But in Ventura, it stayed mostly theoretical—rumor at the perimeter.

What I remember is the feeling that we'd created a room without walls.

And once you do that, even once, you start chasing it.

Irvine — The scene expands

The Irvine lot show was the same story in a different key.

The place already had momentum when we arrived. You could feel it—like the asphalt had a memory. This lot had history. Not official history, not plaque history, but scene history—the kind you can feel in how fast people gather and how little they pretend they're not eager.

The crowd was bigger, quicker, less polite about forming. In Ventura, people wandered over. In Irvine, they arrived like they'd been promised something—and now they were here to collect.

We were older too—older meaning slightly more confident and slightly more delusional. That's the danger zone: competent enough to pull it off, not wise enough to be careful.

We got sound fast. Someone counted off. We hit the first groove and it felt like the lot leaned in.

Irvine had more edge. More characters. More voltage. More "what could go wrong" baked into the atmosphere. There were moments I caught myself scanning—not for applause, not for approval—but for signals: the guy getting too worked up, the couple arguing hard enough that everyone nearby pretends not to hear, the person wandering through the gear area like boundaries are optional.

And then there was the other layer—the invisible authority. In Ventura we felt under the radar. In Irvine it felt like the radar was already pointed at us and we were waiting for the sweep.

That tension did something to the music.

It made it urgent.

We played tighter. Louder. Like if we stopped, the spell would break and the reality of the parking lot would come crashing back in.

There was a moment—song title doesn't matter, moment matters—when the groove locked so hard it felt like the crowd moved as one organism. Not a mosh. Not chaos.

A shared pulse.

And for a few minutes, everything made sense.

That's the drug.

The danger is you start believing you can live there. That if you just recreate that moment often enough, you'll be okay. That it will fix whatever's broken. That it will justify the miles, the sleep deprivation, the fights, the ridiculous logistics of hauling gear into places never meant to hold a band.

But the lot show doesn't love you back.

It just happens.

And then it's gone.

Two lots, one lesson

Ventura taught me the holy side: music as an invitation, joy as a shared secret, a band turning asphalt into a stage.

Irvine taught me the real side: when you light up a place with sound, everything shows up—tender, messy, beautiful, dangerous.

Both were true.

In both lots, I remember the way people looked at us—not like *entertain us*, but like:

thank you for making this happen.

That look stays with you.

It can also trick you into thinking you're invincible.

We weren't.
Nobody is.

But for a couple hours—two different years, two different venues—we lived inside a world we built ourselves. A concert with no walls. A community with no address. A miracle with an extension cord.

And a reminder, every single time, that the best parts of it were temporary.

Which is exactly why we kept doing it.

Chapter 11: First Club Nights — The Palomino Door

By late ’84, the backyards were starting to feel like reruns.

Not because they weren’t fun.
Because we could do them in our sleep.

We knew how to build a room out of a lawn and one working outlet. We knew how to summon a crowd with flyers and rumor. We’d even pushed past the edge of the map and learned what that cost.

If the band was going to grow up, we had to step into rooms with real lights, sticky floors, and start times that didn’t care about our mythology.

After Halloween and the alley gig behind It’s Only Rock & Roll Records, the ambition got sharper.

There was one name that kept coming up:
The Palomino Club.

The Palomino wasn’t just a bar—it was a shrine. Stories lived there: the neon horse, the legends, the feeling that real careers had brushed those walls. For a bunch of misfit Deadheads from the Valley, the idea of seeing our crooked turtle name connected to that room felt like science fiction.

We started hearing the same sentence over and over:
“If you really want to be taken seriously, you’ve got to get into the Pal.”

Steve Miller—our manager—scribbled contacts into his spiral notebook like he was cracking a safe.

And then—like half the best Valley stories—the door didn’t open through a big pitch.

It opened through Kinko’s.

Carl at Kinko's

Kinko's wasn't just my paycheck. It was part of our circulatory system. Flyers were born there. Last-minute miracles happened under fluorescent lights.

That's where I met Carl.

He came in to prep the Palomino's weekly newspaper ads—band names, spacing, deadlines, the kind of precision that looks easy until you've watched someone do it for real. Sometimes he had me cut stacks of tickets so they'd look clean. He'd make calendars too—month-at-a-glance sheets with every band booked, trimmed and stapled like the room's future had to be assembled by hand.

It was basically the Palomino's nervous system, printed and built right there on our tables.

And I already loved that room. I'd been to shows there. I'd watched Albert Collins tear the roof off. I'd seen Bruce Willis get up and jam. It was the kind of place where legends felt normal and surprises didn't feel rare.

So while we were trimming and stacking and lining things up, I did what any hungry young musician would do:

I told Carl I had a band.

He didn't give me a speech. He didn't promise anything.

He just…
got us an opening slot.

Crossing the border

Walking into the Palomino with our gear felt like crossing an invisible border.

The maple stage. The long bar. The low ceiling stained with decades of smoke and music. Everything in that room whispered the same thing:

Don't waste this.

We weren't country. We weren't slick. Our name still looked like a typo.

But we were inside.

Or as Steve would've said in his own way:
"we're in…we're on!!!"

Becoming a room band

Over time, the Palomino became a home base. Burt and his partner Mack started booking us not only there, but into rooms in the same orbit—often south of L.A.—where the load-in was long, the drive was longer, and you learned quickly what "professional" actually meant.

Eventually we could do our own nights: invite guests, build a whole evening around our crowd, have familiar staff and a familiar room where the Hardshells could land.

The Palomino became a measuring stick.

Your friends liking you was one thing. The backyard faithful dancing in somebody's side yard was one thing. But the Palomino had its own weather. People there had seen everybody. They didn't owe you anything.

If they liked you, you felt it.
If they didn't, you felt that too.

That's why one of the reviews from a Palomino night meant so much to me. It wasn't just praise. It was recognition. We clearly had some Grateful Dead in our bloodstream—no use pretending otherwise—but we weren't trying to be anybody's Xerox. We had acoustic songs, electric songs, originals, goofiness, soul, weird left turns, and a whole lot of faith that if we followed the feeling hard enough the set would hang together.

When somebody outside our circle picked up on that and heard us as our own thing, that felt big.
It felt like maybe the crooked little world we'd been building could actually hold up under lights.

Proof

Once you saw your name connected to that room—in an ad, on a calendar, on a ticket, on the board out front—it did something to your brain.

It made the band feel less imaginary.

More real, even if still barely under control.

We were still the same scrappy bunch of Valley misfits, same crooked name, same patched-together momentum.

But now there was proof.

We weren't just telling people we had a band.
We were in the paper.
We were on the schedule.
We were in the room.

Hard lessons under neon

The Palomino also taught me that magic comes with consequences.

One night I got seriously sick mid-show—so sick I had to leave before I packed up my gear. The band packed my stuff, but my AKG mic got left behind.

Later, I asked Carl about it.

He showed me a box full of abandoned microphones and said, “Which one is yours?”

Mine wasn’t there.

That one hurt.

It was a lesson: take care of your gear, take care of your body, and don’t assume the blur will hand you a clean second chance.

That night Gwen and Sam took me back to their place and tried to help, but I ended up needing a doctor:

walking pneumonia.

I’d never had to learn that lesson on a gig before.
I’ve never forgotten it.

One door opens another

Once we were connected to the Palomino world, other doors opened too. I could book my Zappa band, BARF, into rooms that would’ve been harder to reach otherwise.

That’s how it worked: one relationship became a path, one gig became another, one door opened two more.

Those first club nights didn’t erase our backyard DNA.
They translated it.

And once we were inside rooms where things could happen, we started realizing something else:

The rooms weren't the point.

They were the beginning of the next test.

By then, the Palomino wasn't just booking us. It was helping us see ourselves differently. Not polished. Not made. Just realer.

Once you carry your gear into a room with history in the walls, you straighten up a little.

You're in the game now.

And the game expects something back.

Chapter 12: The Palomino, Rick Rubin, and a Night in the Story

By the time we played a real showcase at the Palomino, we already understood what that room meant—not because we'd memorized the legend, but because we'd carried amps through those doors enough times to respect the weight of the place.

Spring '88, North Hollywood.

We pulled into the lot with our usual cocktail of optimism and stomach knots. The neon horse glowed above the door like a dare.

Burt, the booker, looked us over—tie-dye, weird spelling, no pedal steel in sight. He didn't ask about influences. He didn't ask about crowd size.

He just grunted:

"You boys weird or good?"

Steve grinned. "Both."

Burt nodded once. "Don't suck."

That was our contract.

At front-of-house, the Palomino soundman ran the board like someone who'd heard every band swear they were special. He gave us the look that said: *Impress me.*

We dragged in our battered gear: Herman's JC-120, Kenny's Tele, my keys perched wherever they fit, Steve's rig humming low. The Hardshells filtered in, mixing with regulars in cowboy hats who had no idea what a Pur'p'l Tur't'l was supposed to sound like.

The set

In the second set we played a killer “Hard to Handle.” The room hesitated—this wasn’t straight country, and it wasn’t what the regulars were expecting—but the groove wouldn’t back down. By the second chorus, even the bartenders were pounding rhythms on pint glasses. Steve’s voice made people look up from their drinks like they’d just been interrupted by something true.

We rolled from there into our own stuff: “Add a Little Spice,” “Nowhere to Turn,” “Go Ahead.” Songs born in living rooms and backyards suddenly had Palomino air around them—every fill, every shout feeling like it counted twice.

And then, mid-set, we noticed him.

Back near the bar, half in shadow: black beard, dark eyes, arms folded.

Rick Rubin.

Not clapping. Not smiling.
Just watching.

There’s a special adrenaline that hits when you realize the guy whose name is on records you own is standing in your room. We didn’t get slick; we got focused. Count-offs tightened. Endings landed cleaner. We leaned harder into the parts that felt most like us.

Or as Steve would’ve put it later:
“we were on…really on”

When the last chord rang, we were sweating, buzzing, and weirdly calm.

Whatever that was, it was real.

The card

Later—after the set, after the blur—a bearded guy slipped Steve a small cream-colored business card and disappeared before we could do the "so what does that mean?" dance.

The name on it:
Rick Rubin.

And in Gothic type, two words that felt like a portal:
DEF AMERICAN.

Nothing concrete came of it. No meeting. No follow-up. And not long after, a different band took "Hard to Handle" to the bank.

It's easy to write this story as disappointment: the famous producer who watched, nodded, and moved on.

But that's not how it felt.

What we got that night was recognition without a costume change. We didn't turn into a slick country act or a cleaned-up Dead clone. We walked into a legendary room and played like ourselves—odd spelling, too-long jams, duct-taped gear, all of it—and the guy whose taste we respected didn't laugh us off the stage.

He didn't rescue us.
He didn't need to.

Our job wasn't to get saved.
Our job was to show up, play hard, and tell the truth with the tools we had.

And that night proved we weren't invisible.

Rubin's silence said what words couldn't:
you're not a joke,
you're not alone,
and if you keep going, you might carve out a corner of the map with your own weird little shell on it.

Kingfish — the second time around

Some nights lodge in the band's bloodstream so deeply you can still taste the room decades later—beer, sweat, cigarette ash, and that electric fog that hangs around a stage when the music has been louder than your plans.

This was one of those nights.

It was our second show with Bob Weir and Kingfish, and the vibe from the jump felt like we'd stepped into a pocket of Deadhead heaven somebody accidentally left open for local weirdos like us.

The first that year had been in San Diego at the Bacchanal—epic sound, clean and huge, the kind of system that makes you play better because you can hear the truth of every note.

But this second one?

This one was the blast—the kind that isn't just about how the set goes, but what happens after, when the band stops being a band and turns back into a bunch of humans trying to metabolize the fact that you just shared oxygen with someone who helped draw the map you've been following.

We ended up hanging—getting wasted with Bob, Matthew, the rest of Kingfish, plus crew. And the thing I still love is it didn't feel like rock stars and peasants. It felt like guys after

work: talking, laughing, telling stories the way people do when the adrenaline finally drains.

I got talking with Bob and asked him about a photo I'd seen—him with his arm in a sling, shot by Brian Gold. It caught him off guard in a good way, like I'd asked about something human instead of mythology. And he answered—openly—like I was John Barlow or an old friend who'd earned the right to ask a real question.

That's what stuck: he didn't perform being Bob Weir for us. He just was a guy.

A guy who'd been through things.
A guy who'd played a thousand nights and still showed up for the next one.

And then I did the most Pur'p'l Tur't'lz thing imaginable: I gave him a Pur'p'l Tur't'lz T-shirt—mine, the one I'd just worn on stage, sweaty and honest. Not a crisp merch-box souvenir. A proof-of-life rag with our crooked little flag on it.

And he dug it.

Like he was genuinely blown away.

Denise Ravitz Scher still tells one detail like it's a badge: Bob spit on her from the stage—front-row splash zone, "in a good way," she always clarifies, laughing like she's protecting the legend from misunderstanding. She swears Chuck Berez got tagged too.

It sounds ridiculous on paper, but in the moment it felt like a baptism—proof you were in it, not watching from the sidelines.

If you asked ten of us what happened that night, you'd get ten versions.
All of them true.

What I know is this: we played our hearts out, we stood in the same weather system as Bob Weir, and for a few hours the distance between fans and the source collapsed into something simple and human.

And we walked out into the night feeling like the universe had winked at our crooked little turtle name and said:

Yeah.
You're in the story too.

Tape note (Side A / Side B)

I labeled the cassette with the set split across both sides—our little proof-of-life artifact from the night—because a show this fun deserved to be saved in real time, not reconstructed later.

INTERLUDE SUITE — THE PALOMINO / KINKO'S ORBIT

The Palomino and Kinko's were more than locations.
They were an ecosystem.

One was a legendary stage with sticky floors and a neon horse.
The other was fluorescent light, paper dust, and late-night toner.

Between them, doors opened.

Not the big Hollywood doors people imagine—more like side doors. Back doors. Doors you didn't even realize were doors until you walked through and found yourself in a room you'd been chasing since high school.

These are some of the stories from that orbit—part band history, part Valley mythology, part proof that the "day job" was secretly feeding the dream.

Interlude I: The FM Architect — From UCLA to the "Bo" Library

While the rest of the band was chasing the perfect overdriven guitar tone, I was staring at a two-line LCD screen, drowning in the math of Frequency Modulation.

In the late '80s, the Yamaha DX7 was king—but it was a kingdom built on a lie. Everyone had one. Almost no one knew how to use it.

To find the real sounds, I went to UCLA, into a specialized DX7 programming course taught by Carl Spangler. We weren't just musicians in that room—we were digital

architects, learning the dark arts of Operators and Algorithms.

But the real advantage came through Kinko's. That's where I connected with Bo Tomlyn—the FM guru whose custom cartridges were the holy grail. Because of that connection, I wasn't just using presets. I had access to sounds that even top-tier session players were chasing.

That same orbit opened even more doors. Suddenly I was walking AES and NAMM floors, surrounded by people building the future of music. Then I'd go straight back to a garage in Canoga Park and plug those ideas into a jam session.

That's where the "Turtlz Patches" came from—a hybrid of theory, insider tools, and Valley grit.

Eventually one keyboard wasn't enough. I built "the refrigerator"—a MIDI rack that looked like NASA control gear powering a backyard band.

And when one of those custom leads cut through the mix like a laser, I knew something:
being the tech geek in the Pur'p'l Tur't'lz wasn't a side role.

It was the edge.

Interlude II: Calling Roger Dean

When we finished *Hatched*, I went big.

I tracked down Roger Dean—yes, that Roger Dean—and somehow got him on the phone in England.

I pitched him fast:
Pur'p'l Tur't'lz. Purple turtles. Hatching. You've never painted that.

He was kind, direct, and asked the real question:
"Are you like Yes?"

If we were chasing that exact sound, he wasn't interested. I told him the truth—we loved Yes, but we weren't them.

Then reality hit: budget. We didn't have one.

He didn't laugh. He redirected.

He pointed me to Kai Krause, a digital artist working in his world, and invited me to see his work. Later, my brother Steve and I went to an exhibit—cathedral islands, impossible architecture, entire worlds built from imagination and discipline.

I walked away more inspired than disappointed.

The message was clear:
build something strong enough to stand on its own.

So we doubled down on DIY. Racer created the visuals. I handled layout and production. We made *Hatched* one cassette at a time.

Roger Dean didn't paint our cover.
But he shaped the idea behind it.

Interlude III: Meeting The Turtles

At Kinko's one day, Mark Volman and Howard Kaylan—The Turtles—walked in.

I couldn't resist.

“I’m in a band called the Pur’p’l Tur’t’lz. You’re not going to sue us, right?”

Howard smiled. “We couldn’t. The names aren’t the same.”

Ice broken.

I invited them to a Palomino show. Half joke. Half hope.

They actually came.

Backstage, they introduced themselves to the band like it was normal.

And in my youthful brain, it never occurred to me to invite them onstage.

That missed opportunity still stings.

A Turtles / Tur’t’lz jam would’ve been instant legend.

Interlude IV: Phil Garris & the Blues for Allah Connection

At Kinko’s, a guy noticed the button on my jacket.

“I painted that.”

Philip Garris—the artist behind *Blues for Allah*.

Soon I was helping him make color copies from the original painting. He came by the house. Signed prints. Told stories.

He said he painted it on LSD, like something was guiding his hand.

Whatever the source, the result hit millions of Deadheads in the same place.

Kinko’s again—paper jams one minute, sacred art the next.

Interlude V: Merl Saunders — The $50 Slot

Burt called: opening slot for Merl Saunders.

Fifty bucks.

We didn't care. We would've paid them.

The stage was already set—Merl's rig front and center. We weren't allowed to move anything.

So we adapted. Like always.

Backstage, Merl asked when we were supposed to finish.
We told him.

He gave us more time.

That told us everything.

No ego. Just respect.

We played like it mattered.
Because it did.

Fifty dollars wasn't payment.
It was proof.

Interlude VI: A&M — The Day the Idea Hatched

Through Steve and Ethel, we met Don Ray Phinney, who wanted us as his backing band.

Not our style—but a gig was a gig.

We made a deal:
pay us to rehearse, pay us to record.

He agreed.

Walking into A&M Studios was like entering another world.

Controlled. Expensive. Quiet enough to hear your own heartbeat.

They rolled out a twelve-foot Steinway.

Now it was just me.

One or two takes. Done.

Then a Hammond with a Leslie—again, one or two takes.

We held our own.

Don didn't.

In rehearsal he talked big. In the studio, he wasn't ready.

We backed him anyway. He paid us.

Over three grand.

Not life-changing money.
Band-changing money.

It flipped a switch:

What if we did this for us?

Later, Don re-cut his vocals—and made them worse.

That was the lesson:

A great studio doesn't make a great record.
Preparation does.
Taste does.
Knowing when to stop does.

We didn't leave with a deal.

We left with proof.

From the archive (Steve Bryant)

“This was a great thing that fell in our lap… we got paid to rehearse, and then record at A&M… we made over three grand so we started saving to record our own.”

Track Note

“You’ll Be Alright (A&M Mix)” — Don Ray Phinney backed by Pur’p’l Tur’t’lz
Personnel: Steve Bryant (bass) · Ken Bellew (guitar) · Greg Herman (guitar) · Todd Myers (drums) · Greg Brown (Steinway piano, Hammond organ)

We didn’t leave A&M with a deal.

We left with a plan.

And once you’ve seen how the machine works, you can’t unsee it.

On the drive home, the conversation shifted—from Don’s songs… to ours.

Hatched wasn’t a dream anymore.

It was next.

Chapter 13: Southbound Miles & Magnetic Trails

The first time we pointed the Pur'p'l Tur't'lz van south, Los Angeles shimmered in the rearview—heat waves rising off the freeway, the Valley melting into asphalt hum.

We weren't chasing a record deal.
We were chasing horizons. New rooms. New weather. And the hope that our weird little shell could travel.

Ripples in the map

By '88 our name started popping up in strange places—little proof that the driveway wasn't the whole world.

We traded gigs with a band called Half Way Home. Years later, their Wikipedia entry would casually mention us as an example of the Dead-style cover bands that were popular in L.A.

Just one line. One small sentence.

But it meant the ripples had left the cul-de-sac.

The van sagged on worn shocks. Money was always tight. Meals were a roulette of tacos, fries, and whatever someone's mom packed "just in case."

Southbound miles weren't glamorous.

They were gas receipts, split tips, sore backs, and car stereos blasting our own hissy tapes like we were trying to hypnotize ourselves into believing the whole thing was real.

But every mile confirmed the same truth:

our little Valley tribe could spill into other cities and still make sense.

Proof on paper

Every once in a while, something came along that made the whole thing look bigger—even to us.

A flyer for the Hollywood Music and Art Festival at the John Anson Ford Theatre did exactly that. There we were, our crooked little band name sitting on a real bill, at a real venue, surrounded by other acts like we belonged there.

That kind of thing does something to your imagination.

It makes the band feel less like a local obsession and more like part of a wider map.

We were still the same scrappy bunch—same patched-together operation.
But now there was printed evidence.

Ventura Theater — the room that gave it back

At some point we found a place that felt like the best version of what we'd been trying to build:

the Ventura Theater.

It made us play better just by standing on the stage.

Not "we grew up here" home—
more like "this room understands us" home.

Real sound system. Real lights. Real nights with a beginning, a middle, and a sweaty end.

We opened for acts that made us double-check the booking: Hot Tuna. David Lindley.

And at least once, we headlined a Dead Head Night—which felt like getting handed the keys to the church we'd been sneaking into since high school.

A small tour that proved a big point

The Ventura stretch pushed us into a tiny run that, on paper, looked like touring:

- Ventura Theater
- Borsodi's in Santa Barbara
- a small club in San Luis Obispo

And honestly? We did really well.

Good crowds. Good energy. The band sounding like itself.

But we also learned something important:

we loved the idea of the road more than the grind underneath it.

"Adventure" turns into "Where are we sleeping?" by 2 a.m. Not everybody loves that transformation.

Still—the miles mattered.

Because they proved we weren't just a rumor band.

We could land.

Isla Vista — the alley gig nobody ordered

Santa Barbara gave us one of the strangest shows of our lives —Isla Vista, really.

We were invited to play for college students, and when we arrived nobody seemed to claim responsibility for hiring us… and yet the party was clearly happening.

They ran a power cord out of a house window like they were feeding electricity to a raccoon, and set us up in an alleyway.

Not a stage.
Not a yard.
An alley.

Which sounds terrible—unless you're us.

If it had power, we could make it a venue.

People appeared from nowhere, like somebody rang a bell for the whole neighborhood. We played, we laughed, we leaned into the absurdity.

Later we slept in random houses—welcoming strangers with spare floors and spare couches. I ended up in a little kid's bed, trying not to break anything, wondering how this counted as a gig while also knowing:

this is exactly the kind of gig you tell stories about forever.

People's Park — daylight magic

Somewhere in that same era we played People's Park one afternoon to a great reception.

Daylight instead of midnight. Faces instead of silhouettes.

It reminded me that not every show needed chaos to feel alive.

Sometimes the magic was just:
we showed up, we played, and people actually listened.

KXLU — two hours live with Johnny V

Around this time we also did something completely different from our usual ecosystem of noise and crowd reaction:

we performed live on the radio at KXLU, hosted by Johnny V —a connection that came through my Kinko's world.

"Live in studio" sounds glamorous until you realize what it actually means.

We were spread out in different rooms—some of us in hallways—positioned wherever a microphone could fit. We could barely see each other.

It was like trying to be a band while playing hide-and-seek.

And there was no crowd. No Hardshell roar. No "Wooo!" coming back at us.

Just headphones, red lights, and the weird awareness that your mistakes don't evaporate into the room.

They go straight into the broadcast.

Which, of course, made it hilarious.

We leaned into it. Treated it like an experiment—the same way we treated the early jams—except now the experiment was happening on the air for two hours.

It was awkward. Unique. Absolutely worth doing.

And it belongs here because it proves something important:

by then, we weren't just surviving in garages.

We were doing real band things—our version of real—without losing the crooked grin that made us us.

Chapter 14: The Fans — Hardshells

Every band says it has fans.

We had something closer to a tribe.

They called themselves the Hardshells, and without them the Pur'p'l Tur't'lz would've been just another Valley band that burned hot and vanished.

Born in living rooms

It started small: friends of friends crowding into Ethel's den, passing pipes and burritos while we rattled the walls.

Then it grew its own infrastructure:
flyer-runners, couch providers, bootleggers, grill operators, impromptu security, amateur therapists.

They weren't just listening.

They were building it with us.

The Sunday ritual

Sundays became sacred.

We'd grill, play half a set, then collapse on couches for *The Simpsons*. Miss one Sunday and you'd spend the week hearing replayed punchlines about dropped drumsticks, half-burnt burgers, and someone's spectacularly bad trip.

These weren't rehearsals.

They were family dinners with feedback as the soundtrack.

Winston's and the Ocean Beach crew

By the time we rolled into Ocean Beach, San Diego, the shell had stretched south.

Winston's was a funky, wood-paneled club a block from the water. The first night we played there, it felt like home immediately—Deadhead vibe, bare feet, cold beer, that easy OB mix of drifters and lifers.

After one set, the manager pulled us aside and asked,
"What do you guys make on Monday mornings?"

We mumbled something about day jobs.

He smirked.
"I'll pay you more to play Sunday nights."

Just like that, we were Winston's Sunday house band.

Two hotel rooms. A rented cargo truck. Gas money.

And the sweetest benefit of all: we could call bosses on Monday and quit, using the rarest sentence in the Valley:

My band pays more than you do.

Those Sunday drives became their own ritual—a rolling frat house in a cargo truck, gear stacked to the ceiling, jokes and smoke bouncing off metal walls.

Meeting Dawn

It was at Winston's that I first saw Dawn.

She was on the dance floor with a date but kept looking my way between spins. At one point she leaned in and said:

"I'm with this guy now… but I won't be later."

I just nodded—cool.

An hour later she and the guy were arguing. By the end of the set she'd ditched him and followed us back to the hotel.

The band razzed me while we found a quiet spot and started kissing, but I didn't care.

When we finally exchanged numbers, it felt like more than a road fling.

At the next gig I stayed at her place before and after the show. Over New Year's we spent a week together, even visiting her birth mom and her mom's boyfriend in Marin. They welcomed us like family—holiday snacks, Dead tickets on December 30th, long soaks in their hot tub.

Later, Dawn asked me to take her cockatiel, Ishtar, back to L.A. until she could pick him up.

That bird became its own saga.

But Dawn became something else entirely.

Before long, I asked her to move in with me.

That decision pulled me out of my parents' house—and eventually north, to Santa Cruz, and later to Jenny.

Music gave me Dawn.

And Dawn quietly re-routed my life.

Family, not fame

That's Hardshell magic in a nutshell.

Fans weren't just bodies in a crowd.

They became friends, lovers, allies—chosen family.

They carried amps, ran cables, defended gigs when things got sketchy, and offered floors and couches when we had nowhere else to land.

We didn't "make it" by industry standards.

But through the Hardshells—and through people like Dawn—the band became more than a sound.

It became a network of lives braided together.

The shell was never hollow.

It was full of people.

Chapter 15: Studio Days — Part I: *Hatched* and the Tape Machine

By 1989, we'd filled enough garages, basements, and backyards with sound to know what we wanted.

The live cassettes were great, but they were blurry snapshots.

We wanted a portrait.
We wanted a record.

Robbie's place

The miracle arrived as Robbie Weaver's home studio in Woodland Hills.

"Home" is misleading—this was a first-class room tucked into suburbia. Lava lamps in the corners. Cables neatly coiled. Racks of gear that looked like they'd fallen off a truck from Capitol.

At the center sat the Tascam 38 reel-to-reel—our ticket from rumor to artifact.

Engineer John Cevatello ran the board. Where we were chaos, he was calm.

With John at the controls and Robbie's studio wrapping us in colored light, it felt like stepping through a portal.

For once, the rooms we'd rehearsed in didn't define us.

This was the real deal.

The sessions

We walked in with a stack of originals that had survived the gauntlet of backyards and Sunday porch tests.

Songs like:
“Peace of Mind” — Kenny’s anthem, finally blooming with real reverb
“Havin’ Fun” — our philosophy squeezed into a sing-along
“Far Away” — Herman’s dream chords drifting through Leslie shimmer
“Little Time Left” — Steve’s urgent, bass-driven plea
“Add a Little Spice to Life” — burrito-wrapper inspiration turned crowd chant
“In-Between Nowhere” — fragile, raw, caught in a single take
“Foolin’ Yourself” — Kenny bittersweet, sharpened
“Running for the Moon” — a closer that felt like it could spin forever

Todd Myers drove the sessions from behind the kit.

Where Chris gave us the earliest thunder, Todd brought a heavier, more focused fire—crisp fills, tight kick, relentless forward motion.

After one particularly fierce pass, Kenny leaned back and said:
“That’s the fire we’ve been waiting for.”

Herman’s JC-120 hummed under isolation blankets. Steve’s bass rig shook the floor. My Yamaha keys perched on whatever stand we could spare—but finally cut through the mix.

For two solid days we lived in that room—overdubbing sparingly, arguing over takes, laughing when somebody botched a lyric.

The best magic stayed close to how we played live.

“In-Between Nowhere” arrived whole in one pass.
John just said, “Don’t touch it.”

“Spice” exploded with that signature “Wooo!” audiences loved.

When we played it back through Robbie’s monitors, we finally heard what we’d been chasing:

not just noise,
songs.

Neon shells

Visually, Racer did most of the heavy lifting on *Hatched*—and not in a casual sense.

Tracy was a main artist for us: logo maker, cover designer, and a craftsperson who understood that production *was* part of the art.

I handled typesetting and J-card layout, then bounced around the Valley and L.A.—cards scored, cassette mastering, printers, approvals—the tiny details nobody sees until they’re wrong.

And Tracy didn’t stop at the cassette.

She screened one-off shirts and sweatshirts over the years—actual Pur’p’l Tur’t’lz swag with the kind of beauty you only get from someone who cares about ink the way musicians care about tone.

$27.43

A few weeks later, a royalty check arrived:

$27.43.

Steve framed it like a trophy and wrote one word under the glass:

VALIDATION.

It wasn't the money.

It was proof that *Hatched* wasn't just ours anymore.

It was out in the world—hissing through tape decks and Walkmans, alive in bedrooms and cars we'd never see.

The songs weren't perfect. Tempos rushed. Vocals cracked. Mixes leaned raw.

But that was the point.

For the first time, the Pur'p'l Tur't'lz had an album.

Something real.
Something no one could take away.

Decades later, that little cassette got a second life. I remastered *Hatched* for vinyl and released it through ElasticStage—the same songs, the same spirit, just spinning instead of hissing.

It didn't smooth out the rough edges.
It proved they were worth keeping.

Field Note — Racer's Garage Press & the Dynacord Disaster

We even played at Tracy's house one afternoon once—Ron Russell era.

We loved Racer, so of course we were glad to do it. It felt like the tribe playing in the tribe's living room, the way it was always supposed to be.

I brought a fairly new Leslie simulator made by Dynacord—a pricey rackmount unit I'd convinced myself was a serious step up.

It had indented trim pots on the back—one of those designs that quietly assumes nobody will touch it without a plan.

While we were playing, I asked the keyboard player from Calvin's band, Urban Dread, if he'd help me dial it in—just tweak it until it sounded best in the room.

He grabbed a screwdriver, reached around, and snapped the potentiometer.

That tiny click—that soft, dumb mechanical failure sound—was the whole afternoon turning into a bill.

The simulator was broken. Done.

I eventually found someone who could repair it, and while it was on the operating table I asked for a modification: mono in / stereo out wasn't enough. I wanted stereo ins and outs.

They built another circuit, did the mod, and the bill got heavy—one of those pay-it-like-a-ransom situations.

I paid it, because of course I did.

When you're chasing a sound, you convince yourself it's always worth it.

That era also marked something else:

Steve and I kept adding equipment as the band grew. At one point we both had refrigerator-sized road cases—his for bass, mine for keyboards.

They helped our sound get bigger and better.

They were also brutally heavy and caused endless hassle.

Our ambition had weight.

Sometimes literally.

Chapter 16: Outtakes, Epics, and Improv (1989–1991)

If *Hatched* was our portrait, what came after were the sketches in the margins—raw, restless, sprawling.

Once the neon-shelled cassettes were dubbed and sold, the reels kept spinning.

So did our curiosity.

Between 1990 and ’91, Robbie Weaver’s room became less “studio” and more laboratory.

Afterburners

Steve called these late-night runs our *afterburners*—the extra miles we squeezed out after the “album songs” were tracked.

Fueled by cold coffee and stubbornness, we’d pile into Robbie’s space on weeknights and chase whatever spark showed up.

Sometimes it was Herman refusing to let a riff die.
Sometimes Kenny walked in with a half-finished melody on a cassette.
Sometimes I held a droning chord on keys until everyone else figured out where it wanted to go.

On the early runs, Todd kept the ship upright—quick hands, big ears.

As the calendar rolled forward, Ron Russell began sitting in, bringing a heavier pocket and calmer patience.

Different drummers. Same mission:
stretch, listen, surprise each other.

Tape tricks and tangents

John showed us how to flip reels and ride varispeed.

Suddenly Herman's solos coughed up hidden counter-melodies.

We re-amped guitars in Robbie's tiled bathroom for natural slap, dragged a speaker into the laundry room for strange reflections, and abused a half-busted digital delay for ping-pong echoes.

If a take had a soul but limped, John would say:

"Don't fix it—frame it."

Some nights we lived by the click.
Most nights we murdered it.

The best takes breathed—tiny rushes around the downbeat, the human wobble that makes a chorus lean forward.

Live-to-two-track nights

Every few weeks we'd kill the safety net:

no overdubs, stereo pair, red light on.

Those nights taught us the value of leaving fingerprints on tape.

Not perfect.
Alive.

None of these outtakes made us famous.

They did something better.

They made us fearless.

The afterburner sessions taught us to trust the room, the tape, and each other—to chase a riff past embarrassment and into discovery.

Hatched was the record.

The afterburners were the fire that kept us warm when the phone didn't ring.

Interlude — The Haire Pharmerz: Two Mics, One Strap, and Rock Bottom (1989–1990)

Somewhere along the line, Steve and I got it in our heads that we should be our own band—just the two of us—outside the Pur'p'l Tur't'lz orbit.

It sounds obvious now.
It wasn't what we did.

We were used to the whole circus—people, amps, drums, volume wars, the safety net of a full band.

But Steve and I hung out constantly. We played and sang together all the time—the way you do when you're young and music is basically the air in the room.

Sam and Gwen were always around too. Always. They'd show up and suddenly the house would turn into harmonies—songs floating through kitchen and hallway like that's just what homes did.

So the duo idea wasn't a business plan.

It was something we were already doing every night.

One day we just said:
let's put a name on it and book gigs.

Steve called it **The Haire Pharmerz**—a name that felt like a band you'd see on a flyer stapled to a phone pole at 2 a.m.

It made us laugh.
Which meant it was perfect.

Zappa, a $40 guitar, and bad timing

Then the universe did what it does when you think you have time:

it sped everything up.

Steve called me while I was on vacation and said we were opening for Timothy Leary—in less than a month.

As a duo.
With no set.
With zero rehearsals.

I had one immediate realization:
I need a guitar right now.

So I bought one in an antique store. Forty bucks. Nylon-string. Already haunted.

Back in the Valley, I heard Frank Zappa was doing a signing at Crown Books. I got in line like everybody else, bought his book, and brought my beat-up new guitar with me because… well, because I'm me.

Zappa looks at it and deadpans:
"What do you want me to write on it?"

I said, "How about 'My Guitar Wants To Kill Yo Mama.'"

He pauses. "That's a lot to write."

Then he writes the whole thing across the cheap guitar in Sharpie and signs it *FZ* like it's nothing.

Later, in the parking lot, a limo pulls up and the driver rolls down the window:

"Does it play better now?"

I said, "Definitely."

They told me to spray it so the Sharpie wouldn't rub off.

Which is the kind of practical advice you only get from strangers orbiting a Zappa signing in a limo.

The night we bombed

Our debut gig was at The Breakaway—Santa Monica, maybe. Honestly it's all a blur of headlights, posters, and nerves.

To calm down I had a few tokes and some drinks.
I was still sick.
My voice was compromised.
My confidence was free and unearned.

We walked onstage full of rock fantasies.

And then we bombed.

Not a gentle "not our best" bomb.
A full-body, long-term memory bomb.

Early in the first song, my guitar came unfastened from the strap and hit the floor.

That sound—wood and embarrassment—still lives in my nervous system.

Then the pickup fell off—held on with putty and optimism—and my roughness wasn't compatible with either.

Our voices didn't lock.
The harmonies didn't land.
Nothing landed.

It was like watching your own crash in slow motion from inside the car.

That night became my personal rock bottom.

Not in a quit-music-forever way.

In a reset-your-standards way.

I made a vow:
I will never play without being properly ready again.

Becoming ready

Afterward I told Steve I'd never do that again.

He, in his Steve way, said—like he was ordering a burrito: "We've got another gig."

So we practiced.
Then practiced more.

We learned how to be a duo. How to pace a set. How to recover when something goes sideways. How to be funny without hiding behind it.

After about nine months, we could entertain people without totally sucking.

Then we could entertain them and actually be good.

The Haire Pharmerz didn't start because we were ready.

It started because we weren't.

And then we became ready.

Interlude — Emmett Chapman, Laurel Canyon, and the Driveway Next Door

The first time I ever saw a Chapman Stick up close wasn't on a record sleeve.

It was at the US Festival.

Steve Wozniak had a technology tent full of futuristic gear, and one station was the Chapman Stick.

I'd already seen one in the wild—Tony Levin with King Crimson—so I knew what it could do.

But this was the first time I could actually feel it: the width of the fretboard, the logic of it, the way it invited both hands to become a full rhythm section.

There was a line.

When it was your turn, you put on headphones, held the Stick, and tried it yourself.

And Emmett Chapman was right there.

Present. Patient. Grounded.

The kind of guy who didn't just build an instrument.

He built a world.

I wanted one immediately.

Of course I did.

He had a flyer that said if you were serious, you could visit his studio and try different instruments.

So I drove up Laurel Canyon Boulevard, and he welcomed me in—no pressure, no pitch, just space to explore.

The truth was:
I didn't know what I was doing yet.
And I definitely didn't have that kind of money.

I left inspired anyway.

Eventually I found a Stick through Walter Woods for $400—an unbelievable deal.

Around then, Steve started getting a little jealous—not mean jealous, just best-friend jealous.

So we made a plan to see Emmett together.

We drove to a show in Malibu…

and Steve forgot his driver's license.

The club wouldn't let him in.

So Steve sat outside near the ocean, listening to waves, missing the show.

We left early so he wouldn't have to sit there alone.

Then the universe cracked a grin:

Emmett moved to the Valley.

Not just near us.
Right next to Steve's house.
Same driveway.

From then on, Emmett and his wife Yuta became part of our world. Real friends—the kind who spend Christmas Eve together.

Over time, Emmett even sat in with the band—this legendary musician showing up like it was normal.

After Steve passed, Emmett came to me and asked gently if he could play at the memorial.

Of course he could.

He opened the night, then sat in with us.

Before we went on, he said:
"I'll just follow along. I'll try not to get in the way."

I told him:
"Play whatever you feel."

I wasn't going to let anyone play bass that night.

Steve was the one we were honoring.

But Emmett didn't replace anything.

He fit.

Like a voice joining a choir, not taking a solo someone else earned.

Sometimes life hands you impossible threads:

you see an instrument in a tech tent, meet the inventor, chase the instrument…

and then he ends up sharing a driveway with your best friend.

And when your best friend is gone, he shows up with humility and music—right when it matters most.

PART IV — LEGACY

Chapter 17: Aftermath & Continuations

The Joint Chiefs — I Came Back

Then I went to a party.

The whole ecosystem was there—friends, fans, the same faces that had stood in backyards and clubs and parking lots.

And somewhere inside the house, in a bedroom, a band was playing.

The Joint Chiefs.

They sounded great.

I recognized the drummer, Andy Vandenbosch, and we started talking. I told him about "retirement"—about quitting music, about Indian food, about being done.

I suggested maybe I could sit in for a song or two.

They invited me to their rehearsal space—their "barricade."

And as soon as we started playing, I knew the truth:

I wasn't retired.

I was just on pause.

I wanted to be in that band.

I was back.

For the next year and a half, I played great shows with The Joint Chiefs—including old haunts like Mancini's—where people were happy to see an ex–Pur'p'l Tur't'l bringing a crowd again.

Not because of nostalgia.

Because the music was still alive.

Leaving the Valley

In 1994, Dawn and I moved to Santa Cruz.

That meant saying goodbye—not just to a band, but to a whole world:

friends
clubs
late-night rooms
familiar geography

After that, every return trip felt like a reunion.

Parking-lot conversations where no time had passed.

A new chapter

Santa Cruz became a new musical life.

Different coastline.
Different scene.
Different people.

Same hunger to play.

Eventually I joined a band called **The Hired Guns**.

And one night, everything converged:

my 30th birthday at the Vets Hall.

On that stage:

- Pur'p'l Tur't'lz

- The Hired Guns
- Edicius
- BARF

All the versions of my life—
in one room.

Like the universe saying:

You didn't quit.
You evolved.

Interlude — The Zappa Detour: B*ARF*

Toward the end of the Tur't'lz era, I started another band:

a Frank Zappa cover band.

I loved his music—but I didn't fully know how to play it yet.

Which, in hindsight, is exactly why I started.

The hotline

I was also convinced we might get sued.

So I did the only logical thing:

I called the Zappa hotline.

818-PUMPKIN.

A real person answered.

I asked:
"If we start a Zappa cover band… will we get sued?"

They said:

“No. We’d be honored.”

That one sentence unlocked everything.

BARF

We became:

BARF

- Keys: Greg Brown
- Bass: Steve Bryant
- Drums: Tony Giraldo
- Guitar: Bruce Kagan
- Guitar/Lap Steel: Bruce Grossman
- Vocals: Rick Bray
- Percussion: Mike Dwyer

Everyone sang.

We didn’t play the obvious songs.

We went deep:
“Cosmik Debris”
“The Torture Never Stops”
“Willie the Pimp”
“Dumb All Over”

And we stitched things together like lunatics.

Ridiculous music.
Righteous music.

It lasted about nine months.

Then it ended—naturally.

No explosion. Just… done.

But it marked something important:

a separation from the Tur't'lz.

Because by then, something had shifted.

The breaking point

We weren't rehearsing seriously anymore.

Drugs had taken over.

Friends had become fiends.

And I hit my limit.

I told everyone:

I'm done.

No bands.
No music.

I'm going to learn to cook vegetarian Indian food.

And I did.

For about nine months.

Epilogue: Looking Back, Moving Forward

I started as a left-handed guitar player.

Then came a Yamaha with mini-keys—and a brother who demanded two hands.

Years later, sitting next to Steve as he digitized the tapes he insisted we record, I watched him do what he always did:

turn a night into something you could hold.

Kenny's voice—chaos outside, care inside.

Ron's echo:
"It's a long time ago… but it could have been a minute ago."

Herman's thread—the riff that refuses to quit.

Bands end.

The brotherhood doesn't.

What lasts is the shell—
the people who wear it, repair it, pass it on.

What gets me now is what survived:

flyers
ticket stubs
cassette labels
scribbled notes

At the time, none of it felt important.

It felt temporary.

Now it proves something:

that the whole little world existed.

Not just in memory.

On paper.
In ink.
In other people's hands.

That means everything to me now.

Coda: The Groove Endures

When the final lights dim
and the last bass line fades

we raise our glasses—
to Steve
to Kenny

Heads nodding in perfect 4/4

Their groove endures

because we keep playing
keep laughing
keep letting the night surprise us

The wheel keeps turning

The shell holds

In the San Fernando Valley's '80s underground,
a misspelled band name became a flag:

Pur'p'l Tur't'lz.

From living-room chaos to Palomino nights,
Dead-show parking-lot gigs, and a *tribe of fans called*
the ***Hardshells****, this is an inside story*
of music, mayhem, brotherhood—
and the fragile magic of a scene that
burned bright and didn't last long enough.

"A memoir, a time capsule,
and an archive you can hear."

Greg Brown is a musician, producer, and educator based in **Santa Cruz, California.** He p played *keyboards in Pur'p'l Tur'tlz* and curated the band's *living archive of recordings, flyers, and artifacts.*

Listen to the Pur'pl Turtlz Archive

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